Torturing the Artist: Celebrity and Trope in Media Representations of the Abstract Expressionists

A Senior Honors Thesis in the Department of Art and Art History

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August 11, 1956.

Jackson Pollock has been pronounced dead.

He went out in a flurry of movement, his body flying through the air like his paints before they hit the canvas. Pollock hit the ground.

His Oldsmobile crashed into a tree after a night of excessive drinking, after years of obsessive drinking.

February 25, 1970.

Mark Rothko has been found dead.

He went out cleanly and controlled, on the day his red murals arrived in their final resting place. He had slashed his arms at the elbows, a well-thought-out and studied plan. He fell backward, lying Christ-like in a 6-by-8 rectangle of red.

Introduction

"Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" – Hamilton

i. About the Paper

Despite the many ways the art world was affected by Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko – both masters of modern art – their legacies have always been wrapped in tragedy. Just as their artistic evolutions are respectively simplified into their signature styles of drip paintings and multiforms, so too are their lives simplified into "Drunk" and "Depressed." Their lives continue to fascinate audiences in equal measure as their work because of the ways their stories ended. Pollock was an alcoholic whose death sparked a contentious debate that lasts to this day about its intentionality. Rothko's suicide came after years of mental instability and failed therapy. They undeniably met tragic ends, and their struggles are an important part of their lives and the interpretations of their works. But these stories are far too often exploited to bolster the reputations of the artists, rather than bolstering them through the artist's skills or the mastery of his craft. Author after author delves into their mental health issues and readers cannot get enough of the juicy details. Plays and films are written on their lives, which lend themselves easily to the dramatic structure of narrative storytelling. And these two men fall into the ever-expanding pantheon of Tortured Artists.

The Tortured Artist trope is admittedly well-founded. It is the concept of an artist, working in any medium, whose brilliant works derive from his or her struggles. These can include financial troubles, relationship issues, or ever-popular mental illness. Films that use this trope range from the dark *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), whose eponymous protagonist's impeccable acting skills stem from his extreme desire to belong and from his buried

homosexuality, to the family-oriented *Frozen* (2013), in which antihero Elsa builds sculptures and architects an elaborate palace simply in which to isolate herself because of her depression and anxiety. Often the lines are blurred as to which came first: the madness or the genius. Although tropes themselves are constructed identities and therefore relegated to the world of fiction and performance, the roots of the Tortured Artist are in the realities of those who lived.

Vincent van Gogh. Ernest Hemingway. Kurt Cobain. Sylvia Plath. Frida Kahlo. David Foster Wallace. Jackson Pollock. Mark Rothko. The list goes on, and the simplest web search leads to an inundation of names and the excitingly gruesome details of their struggles. Popular perception has assumed these artists are representative of the personalities of those in their professions, quite literally naming an entire "Lost Generation" of creatives after an epigraph in one of Hemingway's books, for example. This has caused a general understanding of artists to be the melancholy and pained people their most famous were. Why and how these are the ones who are most famous will be examined later, but this perception is dangerously unfair, as it romanticizes unhealthy lifestyles and reduces the products of great artists to their external circumstances, rather than their own diligence and skill. Were these artists really Tortured, or were they only constructed to be?

Although Pollock and Rothko are part of a field far more removed from glamour than that of movie stars, they nonetheless cannot escape the pitfalls of Celebrity. Celebrity and the Tortured Artist are complementary: both are identities shaped by assumptions used in the absence of fact, and the fact's lack of attainability. The assumptions regarding trope are manifested as stereotypes, whereas those of Celebrity are "based on an imagined intimacy fostered by the media"[1] between the worshipper and the worshipped. Just as the Tortured Artist

[1] Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 25.

trope makes it unclear as to whether pain causes art or artists are more inclined to pain, this definition makes it unclear whether the media follows Celebrity or if Celebrity is forged from media. The answers to these postulates have oscillated for as long as they have existed, and will be reexamined with new case studies to draw relevant and researched conclusions.

This thesis explores the means and effects of the media's use of the Tortured Artist trope in building Celebrity. In particular, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko are used as case studies in understanding this ongoing process of "celebritization." The topic is examined through analyzing significant representations of the artists in the media published during their lifetimes and today. The chosen contemporary texts and those which best exemplify the celebritization of the two Abstract Expressionists are Ed Harris' feature film *Pollock* (2000)[2] and John Logan's play *Red* (2009),[3] both award-winners in their respective fields. The former covers Pollock's life from his brink of stardom to his death, and the latter accounts for Rothko's life during the years he painted his Seagram murals. Both texts are heavily focused on the artists' relationships with other younger artists, *Pollock* centering on the eponymous character's marriage with Lee Krasner, and *Red* centering on Rothko's employment of imagined studio assistant Ken. These are presented as foils to the artists' relationships with their work. Their contents aim to demonstrate how postwar American values determined the art-historical worth of two of the country's most important modern artists, while their formal qualities demonstrate the same for today's society.

The thesis analyzes the commodification of these two artists' tragedies through primary and secondary sources, examining how the Tortured Artist trope was encouraged – both intentionally and not – by those who knew the two men personally, academically, and creatively. First, the history of the trope and of celebrity is established and investigated. Then, Pollock's life

[2] *Pollock*, directed by Ed Harris (Sony Pictures Classics, 2001), DVD.
[3] John Logan, *Red* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2011).

is presented through the framework of the media depictions that shaped his career, particularly those that are additionally featured in the film. Once the facts, or lack thereof, have been presented, the direction and screenplay of *Pollock* are thoroughly dissected to uncover the film's role in utilizing and creating Celebrity. The same pattern will be used in exploring Rothko and *Red.* In addition, a theatrical production of *Red*, directed by the thesis author, was completed on March 8, 9, and 10, 2018, and the thesis will continue with a first-person account of its pedagogy and staging. Finally, a conclusion is presented about the relationship between art, affliction, media, and Celebrity, and the effects each element has on the others.

It is important to note that this thesis is complicit in the process of celebrity, and in the use of the Tortured Artist trope. Inherent in its focus on these themes, it too reduces the vast pool of scholarly research on these two artists to aspects of their reception in which they had no desire to partake. Because of this, the thesis does not shy away from themes of pop culture, nor from the blunt, tabloid-esque exploitation of the artists' lives and deaths. Section titles are as catchy as headlines, and each chapter begins with a popular quote. I acknowledge this now to save myself from accusations of hypocrisy, and I apologize to Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, who truly are far more than the traits this thesis focuses on.

ii. Definitions

The Tortured Artist. The Starving Artist. The Struggling Artist. The Mad Genius. The Recluse. Divine Madness. There are many names for a creative individual whose life is not as glorious as their work. Below are clarifications of the words commonly used surrounding this idea and incorporated in this paper.

TROPE. A trope is any overused and oversimplified theme or character. TV Tropes, an encyclopedia of the subject, defines the term as "a storytelling device" that is "a shortcut for describing situations… the audience will recognize."[4] Essentially, it is a narrative cliché used for clarity. This can manifest in plot devices (think the talkative villain whose plan is thwarted by his monologue's length), relationships (the evil stepmother and her innocent daughter), or stock characters. This latter category includes the Sassy Best Friend, the Masked Vigilante, and of course, the Tortured Artist. These tropes can be assigned to characters as a quick way to buff out a supporting role, or to make a complicated character more understandable. While incorporating a specific trope can elevate a work through its reference to an older masterpiece (like the Shakespearian star-crossed political lovers of *The Hunger Games*), using tropes ultimately tarnish the honesty of a story, as their aim to appeal to a mass audience sacrifices the nuance of individuality.

THE TORTURED ARTIST. This example of a stock character exhibits certain characteristics and often exists in a story with certain plot developments. They are an artist in some way, usually a visual artist, an actor, a writer, or a musician. They suffer from mental illness, addiction, or both, although they are not successfully treated for these. Often their illness or addiction leads to relationship trouble and isolation. They are a portrait of a lonely, struggling person with a huge amount of passion. It is this passion and this pain that fuels their work, and their heightened emotions allow them to create in ways others are unable. Their art becomes a replacement for human connection, and the quality of their art is usually the primary factor for their positive or negative mood.

[4] "Tropes," TV Tropes, Accessed March 29, 2018, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Tropes.

The Tortured Artist's narrative often has a rise and fall. Many times they are shown before they discover their talent – *Whiplash* (2014), for example, begins with its protagonist's first day training under the strict regime of his drum teacher. Perhaps someone in a higher social circle will aid them on their journey, presenting a story about artistic triumph. But a Tortured Artist's narrative can also begin at the pinnacle of their achievement – the tipping point before their downfall. Riggans becomes increasingly unhinged throughout *Birdman* (2014) as he becomes less and less able to control his concept of a perfect theatrical production, falling from grace in the process. Stories featuring Tortured Artists typically make statements on art and pain as individual concepts as well as connected concepts, and have ambiguous endings that exalt neither skill nor stability.

MEDIA. The media here is comprised of the body of producers who publish information relating to real people. This includes, but is not limited to, journalists, filmmakers, reviewers, critics, photographers, playwrights, and interviewers. There is an overlap between the media and artists, as well as the media and the art world, as most working in the field of media utilize an artistic skill of some sort. Biographical films and plays are not discredited from the media for their reliance on fiction, as all media has a reliance on fiction in some capacity or another.

CELEBRITY. Of the words listed here this is the one most used in in everyday language, yet the one whose definition is hardest to pin down. At the simplest level, a celebrity must have basic name recognition and be associated with a specific field. They are part of a power structure that makes them de facto leaders of that field. Most importantly, they are someone to whom the media pays attention. "Celebrity culture is a media-generated construct,"[5] not an individual-generated one. A celebrity only matters if others are watching, and the media guides a viewer to

[5] Pete Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 46.

watch the right person. Therefore, there is nothing inherent in a person that makes them a celebrity, which is distinct from respect or fame. It also means that one does not need to ask for Celebrity, thus "fame is something one earns... while celebrity is something one cultivates or possibly, have [*sic*] thrust upon one."[6]

Celebrity also implies a sense of recognition outside of one's own field. A successful writer well-known amongst their peers, for example, might merely be famous, whereas a writer like J.K. Rowling has overcome the boundaries of her field, earning noteriaty and attention from major media outlets, as well as celebrities in other industries. The latter group is important, as one of "the most visible perquisites of celebrity is access to one's fellow celebrities."[7] For this reason, as will be made clear, Pollock and Rothko can be considered celebrities even though their lives were not frequently found in tabloid magazines, nor did the paparazzi obsess over photographing them. But both men were removed from their artistic spheres through the actions of the media, which therefore placed them into the homes of middle and upper-middle class Americans who otherwise had little to no interest in art. The creation of *Pollock* and *Red* only corroborate this conclusion, as they demonstrate the lasting impact the artists had on the American psyche, still relevant and studied today by those working in different fields.

iii. Celebrity, Suicide, and Celebrity Suicides

There is a clear similarity between how America treats its celebrities and how it treats the self-killed. Both involve an unnecessary and intense scrutiny that ultimately degrades the subject – a self-serving interest that appeals to one's curiosity at examining that which is not one.

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[6] Schickel, 14.
[7] Ibid., 259.

Celebrities and interesting deaths are two of the most common topics in the media – when the two combine it becomes the optimum news story. Funerals, a topic "once considered… taboo, has [*sic*] now become trendy,"[8] and two factors are influential in determining the media attention they will receive. The younger a celebrity dies or the more gruesome their death, the more the person is posthumously adored. The deaths of Heath Ledger and Brittany Murphy (who died young), and Robin Williams and Philip Seymour Hoffman (who died gruesomely) are recent examples of this phenomenon. To understand how the occurrence of suicide cultivates Celebrity, a further exploration into the media and the consumer's roles in celebritization is necessary.

Theologist Pete Ward advocates for a semiotic-like approach to the idea of Celebrity: "Celebrities matter not because of who they are but because of what they represent. It is the meanings that become attached to celebrities as they appear in the media that form their currency in the circulation of popular culture."[9] Like discussed, they exist outside of the medium in which they work. While their fame might stem from their actions, Ward argues that their Celebrity stems from their personality, their habits, their likes and dislikes and associates: their "meanings." This distinction between fame and Celebrity is important, as one is merit-based and the other is media-generated. Before the era of gossip magazines and television and the internet, a merit-based popular culture was the only option. But the more a person could be photographed and the farther information on them could be spread, the more the persona of a celebrity developed. "The history of celebrity and the history of communications technology… are very closely linked"[10] and this ability to quickly proliferate information – to inundate a consumer with public figures – has "created a need for simplifying symbols – usually people… that crystallize

[8] Alix Strauss, *Death Becomes Them: Unearthing the Suicides of the Brilliant, the Famous, and the Notorious* (New York: Harper, 2009), xviii.
[9] Ward, 3.
[10] Schickel, 28.

and personify an issue, an ideal, a longing."[11] This is a major reason why Pollock and Rothko became celebrities: whereas artists have been characterized as Tortured for centuries, the specific forms of media that existed in the 1950s allowed that characterization of the two artists to be widely disseminated in a way not possible earlier.

Ward's direct connection between a celebrity (the signifier) and the ideals they represent (the signified) creates a need for the media to cultivate a celebrity's image, to manifest a link. Media "must walk the fine line between exposure and concealment to generate and maintain fascination and fandom."[12] While a celebrity's actions are unchangeable, it is how those actions are both revealed and reproduced that affect how they are received: "the real fuel that drives the market is the stories that are spun around celebrities."[13] From these stories tropes are built, tropes that can align with a certain demographic's interests. The stories are appealing enough to captivate and maintain an audience, but vague enough to keep them always wanting more. "This passionate proximity combined with a tragic distance is the core of fandom. The relationship between fan and idol suffers from a tragic alienation… the media exists to capitalize on this… promising to provide a link between the pair through gossip and exposé."[14] The relationship becomes mutually dependent: the fan needs the celebrity as an entity to worship, as a signifier of their values. When "celebrity culture tempts us off the sidelines" and "actively invites us to form a view and make judgment"[15] the seduction in idolatry is indicative of the human instinct to strive for self-awareness. A disagreement over Michael Jackson, for example, is actually a disagreement over beliefs: one side values artistry and skill whereas the other values their sense

[11] Ibid.
[12] Reni Celeste, "Screen Idols: The Tragedy of Falling Stars," Fitzgerald, 138.
[13] Ward, 46.
[14] Celeste, 138.
[15] Ward, 2.

of ethics. This human desire to examine and profess one's morality is essential in the proliferation and adoration of Celebrity and is why fans "buy into" the stories the media sells.

Celebrities, too, need fans, but for a different and more clear reason: "star power is the product of a relation,"[16] and when there is no relationship there is no star. Celebrities need the interest of fans because the interest of fans is why the media keeps producing, and without media production Celebrity cannot live. Despite this cyclical relationship, Celebrity seems to be an after-thought to its own existence: the media gives attention to the celebrities the fans admire, and the fans admire the celebrities to whom the media gives attention. The celebrity themselves does not factor directly into the equation, and acts as object rather than subject. Therefore, although the goal of Celebrity as a concept might be to acquire fans, the celebrity might not share this need, as they (not their Celebrity) gain very little from media or fan interest. Ultimately, there is tension between the desires of the *idea* of Celebrity, and a celebrity themselves.

Rothko and Pollock are just two examples of a wide range of celebrities who had mixed feelings toward the media. They both needed it to bolster their careers, Pollock enjoying his success but faltering under its pressures and Rothko detesting it altogether. As will be discussed in their respective chapters, each artist was misrepresented by the media, and desired a farther separation between their lives and their work, which they believed could stand on its own. For some celebrities today, however, the separation between their work and their lives is not so distinct. If Celebrity is a media-made product, is there such thing as misrepresentation when the product is themselves and therefore ultimately whoever the media decides they are? Because of this tension, this distrust of the machine that keeps them going, celebrities often struggle with the demands of the media. A 1995 survey by Charles Figley, Ph.D., director of the Psychosocial

[16] Celeste, 136.

Stress Research Program at Florida State University, found that the number one stressor for "the public's top-ranked celebrities" was "the celebrity press."[17] But a celebrity's ensuing instability – which increases alongside their fame – has a counter-intuitive effect on their audience: it only makes the public desire them more.

It is no secret that the public revels in watching celebrities flounder. While at one time scandals and struggles were kept secret from the press, "today that information is an important part of celebrity journalism"[18] with public figures going so far as to "leak" their own misconducts. The reasons for this are numerous and complex. One hypothesis is that the selfishness of humanity does not want to see one person prosper far more than any other. A sense of unfairness creeps in every time a once-ordinary person is splashed across a front page for their new extraordinary life. Another hypothesis is a desire to see a fallen star make a comeback. The Underdog is another favorite American trope, but one cannot be an underdog unless they are at the bottom of the social ladder. Therefore, once a celebrity has attained a maximum amount of attention from their fans and has no higher climb, they fall from grace in order to live the process and thrill of achieving status once more. But the most popular and published opinion on why celebrity failure is so compelling is because of a fan's desire to relate to their idol.

One of the most enduring celebrities, so to speak, is Jesus Christ. The entire conceit of the Christian religion is that Jesus became man to die for the sins of mankind – he is both wholly divine and wholly human. This is an immense draw to the faith – a god who can directly understand the plights of an individual, a god whose holiness seems attainable. Any god's ability to fail kindles "particular pleasure" as it "paradoxically… seems to confirm their 'humanity.'"[19]

[17] Mary Loftus, "The Other Side of Fame," Fitzgerald, 108.
[18] Strauss, 7.
[19] Ward, 7.

This concept is easily transferrable to celebrity culture: just as "we identify with gods who mess up," celebrity "failures… often seem to make celebrity figures more accessible to the public."[20] When a fan's interest is nearly entirely "rooted in the extent to which [they] relate to what [celebrities] represent,"[21] this accessibility is paramount in *allowing* a fan to relate. Not only is the celebrity more similar to the fan, which creates a bond, but their path seems achievable, giving hope to the fan that one day they, too, can join the ranks of the rich and famous. But this desire to "uncover and expose the nudity of the star"[22] bears an ugly effect. The more one wants to connect with a celebrity, the more they will actively seek the unfavorable aspects of their life. For a fan will not find themselves in the polished presentation of a celebrity; they will only do so in the person's ordinary faults. Because of this, "love of the star is a movement from glamour to defilement."[23]

This is from where the public's obsession with celebrity death stems. It is evidence that this person is not as godlike as they might seem – they are subject to mortality just as anybody else is. When a celebrity kills themselves their utter humanity rises to an all-time high. Values are challenged, and when a fan accepts their icon's addiction, depression, or lack of faith, they are comforted by their own ability to forgive. For once they feel at peace they are not a celebrity and are content with their own blissfully ordinary lives. A celebrity's reputation will increase posthumously due to the sheer sorrow of the situation: when a fan loses their idol's "brilliance and their genius… the loss seems that much sadder, its impact that much greater,"[24] and the

[20] Ibid., 102.
[21] Ibid., 3.
[22] Celeste, 137.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Strauss, 4.

celebrity's value that much more noticeable. It is a classic example of not appreciating something until it is gone.

Examining the fanbase itself is important in understanding its reaction to celebrity death. Most public figures are politicians, athletes, or entertainers. By and large the entertainment industry is comprised of artists: musicians, actors, writers, painters, directors, and more. And although the media has different intentions than artists have, it nonetheless is also comprised of writers, photographers, directors, and more. Therefore, public sadness is frequently expressed *by* artists *about* artists: every biopic on Frida Khalo, Diane Arbus, and Andy Warhol[25] is proof of this. Because "art still fascinates and retains its meaning and value for centuries,"[26] this sadness can be felt and expressed for years to come. So if those naturally inclined to express emotion (media artists) are coming into contact with celebrities ("creative" artists), and if fans primarily seek those to whom they can relate, it would follow that those who feel pains and have struggles would gravitate toward celebrities who had the same, and would publicize their lives. Here is another source of the perpetuation of the Tortured Artist. Perhaps it is not that all artists are tortured, but those who *are* are the ones upon whom the media focuses, as they are the ones to whom most can relate and therefore will accrue the most Celebrity.

This wholesome viewpoint of the media and of fans is only part of the picture, as of course "we are also addicted to the drama."[27] As much as "the emphasis on… scandal, disease, divorce, [and] addictions… bring [*sic*] closer the realism or vulnerability of the body of the star,"[28] it also makes for an exciting story. The entire existence of the entertainment industry, and

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[25] *Frida* (2002) and *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* (2006) are biopics of the first two, and although Warhol has never had a film of his own, he appears as a character in films such as *Basquiat* (1996) and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996).
[26] Ibid., 174.
[27] Ibid., xix.
[28] Celeste, 138.

therefore a sizable portion of America's celebrities, is born of humanity's need to engage with drama. "Given our obsession… in things that are taboo,"[29] celebrity suicides feed a mind's desire for spectacle. "Our shock factor is heightened"[30] and shock is key in entertainment: repetitive stories become boring, especially in a world where information is spread so quickly. Consumers "can't fathom how someone with wealth, beauty, and fame could be so miserable,"[31] and the act of puzzling this together through public sorrow is reminiscent of next-day blog posts sharing theories about a recently-aired television episode. The closer a celebrity is to the ordinary person the more their fans can relate to them. But come too close and they lose what makes them special. Suicide is an effective way of ensuring a celebrity will always be different – "it ironically keeps that person's life story alive."[32] And because of the media's tendency toward trope, sometimes "more than the body of work an icon creates, what will forever define him becomes his suicidal act."[33]

In her book on celebrity suicides Alix Strauss (not-so) jokingly asks "what's the fastest way to make money on the artwork you own? Hope the artist dies."[34] Celebrity can truly only be cemented in death. A celebrity is a "pure singularity, what cannot be replaced."[35] Their death brings finality in the way a blackout at the end of a performance does, and "creates a 'finite commodity.'"[36] There are no more highs and lows, no more guessing the trajectory of their career path. An artist at the top of their game at the time of their death will always have the glory of their final years. They are afforded the luxury of never having fallen, never having lost their

[29] Strauss, 4.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Strauss, 12.
[33] Ibid., 6.
[34] Ibid., 171.
[35] Celeste, 136.
[36] Robert Hughes, *The Spectacle of Skill: Selected Writings of Robert Hughes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 127.

touch. James Dean only acted in two notable films. His career could have flopped, the public could have gotten tired of him after his next project, he could have sustained a career-inhibiting injury. But his death ensured that these things did not happen: all that happened was that his filmography was marked entirely by solid, memorable performances. His death, no matter how much life it cut off, was essential in fostering the icon-status he has today.

Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko's deaths are therefore inextricably tied to their Celebrity in equal weight to their careers. The media's use of the Tortured Artist trope in their reactions and responses to the artists' deaths showcases the values that can be pulled from both their lives and the American psyche. Celebrities are "symbols of various motifs of life,"[37] tropes in of themselves. In examining the media's role in the creation of Pollock and Rothko's Celebrity, these symbols will be revealed, giving new relevance to the importance of their body of work. For as much as one might want to say they made good art, the truth is that they made symbolically-pertinent art. Even within American culture there are many who disavow modern art for its lack of immediate clarity. This group has different values than those who see modern art as the pinnacle of American creation. This paper aims to examine how these differing bodies of people work in one system to build the legacies Pollock and Rothko have earned.

iv. About the Process

As illuminating as the resources were which provided the foundation for this paper, they proved to be valuable in a unique, unforeseen way. Strauss' *Death Becomes Them* is a deeply-scrutinizing look at the suicides of celebrities throughout history. It provides fun facts, statistics,

[37] Malcolm Boyd, *Christ and Celebrity Gods: The Church in Mass Culture* (Greenwich: The Seabury Press, 1958), 11.

and other quickly-digestible information, easy for someone to understand even while skimming. Jeffrey Kottler's *Divine Madness* is so wrought with personal opinion, bias, and anecdotes that it could not be cited once in the main body of this paper. Julie Codell's *Nationalizing Abject American Artists* is frequently cited in this paper but is written on the assumption that Pollock and Jean-Michel Basquiat were factually abject, arguing that the media takes advantage of this abjection, rather than creating it. These sources and more reveal an interesting phenomenon: regardless of their stances on the Tortured Artist trope, all writers fall prey to it.

If "biographies have mythologized creativity and sensationalized [artists'] life stories,"[38] as Codell rightfully identifies, then the texts which analyze these biographies indulge in that mythology, taking pleasure in and aware of the stereotypes they perpetuate. In fact, Kottler admits "the relationship between creativity and madness is often exaggerated. There are many more well-adjusted, emotionally healthy, high-functioning creative artists than there are those who end up in mental hospitals."[39] Consequently, there is no way to justify his book, a 336-page argument for the existence of a direct connection between pain and genius, other than accepting that it is an interesting read, an amusing way to pass an afternoon. It appeals to the part of an audience that cannot help but love a good conspiracy theory. It exists for the same reason *National Treasure* (2004), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) do: even though there is an abundance of evidence (or proof) that these alternate histories did not happen, their entertainment value outweighs an audience's need for truth.

A variety of sources were used in the writing of this paper. Since the paper covers two time-periods (the mid-to-late 20th century and first decade of the 21st) and two narrative genres

[38] Julie Codell, "Nationalizing Abject American Artists: Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Jean-Michel Basquiat," Auto/Biography Studies, June 3, 2014, 119.
[39] Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Divine Madness: Ten Stories of Creative Struggle* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 2.

(nonfiction and historical fiction), there does not exist a single type of source which would suffice in proving its argument. Therefore, the sources are diverse in intellect and opinion. There are gossip websites and picture magazines. There are biographies written by those who personally knew the artists and those who did not. There are sources that Pollock and Rothko themselves could have read, and sources which were written within the past year. Although perhaps unconventional, this approach proved beneficial to the scope and subject matter of the thesis. For just as much as these sources articulate ideas of Celebrity or tragedy, they demonstrate how these ideas have shifted between the lives of Pollock and Rothko and those who have later immortalized them in film and theatre.

A larger project could delve more deeply into examining these differences. It is curious whether vocabulary has changed because ideology has changed, or whether linguistic patterns have changed. More research could also examine the history of trope in theatre, as this paper only covers a brief history of trope in film. Furthermore, with increased access to resources this paper could be expanded to include Pollock and Rothko's reactions to their increasing fame beyond their posthumously-studied behavioral changes. With significant expansion the paper could even divide into two parts, with one looking at additional case studies of artists in theatre (*Vincent in Brixton* (2003) or *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (1993), for example) and the other looking at additional case studies of artists in film (*Basquiat* (1996) and *Frida* (2002) among the more popular). Although from an entirely different moment and country, J. M. W. Turner's life could perhaps be examined as he has been the subject of both a play (*The Painter* (2001)) and a film (*Mr. Turner* (2014)).

Ultimately, this paper is confined to examining the ways in which the Tortured Artist trope was used by the media to build the Celebrities of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko during

their lives and immediately after, the effects these uses had, and how modern-day works of media accept and reject the trope to turn Celebrity into Legacy.

Chapter I. Pollock: *Life*, Death, and Everything in Between

"You will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit." – Oscar Wilde

At no point in the history of art before 1950 had someone skyrocketed to fame in the way Jackson Pollock did. This is not to say he achieved more recognition than any other artist – that statement would be almost inarguably false – but that no other artist had achieved it so fast. Within the span of the 20th century's fifth decade Pollock developed his first abstract style, signed a gallery contract, developed his famous drip style, was featured in a national and mainstream magazine, and retreated back into struggle. Not only had he "broken the ice" in the art world, as Willem de Kooning said in reaction to a posthumous record-breaking sale of the artist's work,[40] but "Jackson Pollock's name became widely known in the United States… by people for whom new trends in painting were otherwise of little or no interest."[41] From a 21st century perspective, Pollock had gone viral, although unlike today's Celebrities he would never go out of style. He was lucky enough (or unlucky enough, debatably) to be born in an era seemingly designed for him. With a war underway, a Golden Age in Hollywood, and an ever-increasing dissemination of information, "Jackson Pollock was the right man at the right time for the construction of new notions of masculinity and creativity."[42]

Born in Wyoming and raised in the West, Pollock always had a bit of Cowboy in him. By the time he was fifteen he was working as a surveyor at the Grand Canyon, camping out and

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[40] Eugene V. Thaw, interview by Steven M. L. Aronson, *Rothko and Pollock and Still Going Strong*, Architectural Digest, December 31, 2007, https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/thaw-article-2008-01.
[41] Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 11.
[42] Doris Berger, *Projected Art History: Biopics, Celebrity Culture, and the Popularizing of American Art*, Vol. 7, International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 32.

learning the ways of the wild nature around him.[43] He dropped his birthname Paul, using his middle name Jackson instead[44] – a name which placed him in America's dark history alongside two other Jacksons – Andrew and Stonewall. B. H. Friedman, one of Pollock's biographers that had actually met the artist, retrospectively noted that everything about Pollock was quintessentially American: not only his name and birthplace, but the age at which he died (the same as his celebrity-writer-equivalent F. Scott Fitzgerald) and the way in which he died.[45] In fact, Pollock's automobile accident came almost exactly one year after that of another American hero: James Dean. "Both cases were reported in *Life* Magazine,"[46] demonstrating their social impact and their value as mainstream news stories. Pollock and Dean's lives ran parallel to each other, both shaped by a "popular culture [which] was becoming increasingly a visual culture, [whose] means were at hand – on film, in the picture magazines, in book publishing – to spread the (painted) word."[47] While artists had been Tortured for centuries, new forms of media made this personality type mainstream and acceptable for the first time.

Many writers who have examined Pollock's relationship to the media have noticed the similarities between his personality and treatment and those of Hollywood's new American male heroes. Doris Berger summarizes this connection:

> "The rebellion against social rules is a common denominator linking Jackson Pollock and the characters portrayed by film stars like Marlon Brando, James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Paul Newman… Marlon Brando and James Dean also embody their film roles in their own star images; they are characterized as

[43] B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 8.
[44] Ibid., 7.
[45] Ibid., 4.
[46] Berger, 31.
[47] Schickel, 220.

> moody, quarrelsome men, plagued by self doubt. Also alcoholism is a common denominator as is last but not least the comparable dramatic deaths of both James Dean and Jackson Pollock in car accidents."[48]

She realizes that Pollock was not alone in the media's insistence on blending person and art. James Dean and Marlon Brando were likewise characterized as the abrasive men they played, with no room for the possibility that their roles were different from their personalities. Not only were the standards of American masculinity changing, but the methods in which this new standard was portrayed were changing as well. The 1940s saw the spread of a new acting technique: the Stanislavsky method.

The Stanislavsky method, brought to America by the prominent Russian director and actor who gave it its name, encourages actors "to delve deep into their psyches and to use their own bodies and feelings spontaneously and forcefully in a quest for inner truth."[49] This spontaneity did in fact lead to more truthful performances as an actor no longer needed to adhere to a third-party director's vision – "you direct yourself,"[50] as Brando once said. Stanislavsky died in 1938, at which time "eleven of the twenty-five New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles acting studios advertising in *Theatre Arts Monthly* were Stanislavsky-based."[51] This marked a radical break from the melodramatic style of actors in the 30s – a style that indulged audiences in the spectacle of cinema. But the 1940s brought a desire for realism, and Stanislavsky's techniques appealed to that interest. With a focus on an actor's own experiences, "in many significant ways, Pollock's ideas converge with the tenets of the Stanislavsky method"[52] as both the artist and the

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[48] Berger, 31.
[49] Landau, 15.
[50] Bert Cardullo, "The Method Revisited," in *Playing to the Camera* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 279.
[51] Mel Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2010), xiii.
[52] Landau, 15.

actors looked inward for inspiration. “The resemblance of [the actors’] methodology to Pollock's mature creative process... at virtually the same time as the Actors Studio[53] opened in New York – is uncanny.”[54] As time passed theatre critics saw the emergence of “a new ‘hero’ on the American scene, a counterculture figure whose primary attribute was the expression of ‘feeling without words…’ The new hero of the fifties never smiled, but stared steadily.”[55] Although intended to describe characters like Stanley Kowalski and Brick Pollitt,[56] this description is just as apt to describe Jackson Pollock: the concept of actors “feeling without words” is akin to an artist painting without symbols, as Pollock tried to do.

Despite these new notions of masculine prowess and Pollock’s similarities between other cowboy-like actor-characters of his time, and “despite [his] excessive performances of masculinity (anger, throwing money around, sexual licentiousness), Pollock [is] feminized by” his lack of “agency to determine [his] career trajectories or pursue [his] aims.”[57] Even with his psychosexual painting method (“men [are] celebrated for [their sexuality] as inextricably bound to their genius”[58]), and even with his hypermasculine aggression, Pollock is likened to the feminine through his lack of control over his own life. As will be explored later, Lee Krasner had *extreme* control over Pollock’s life, ironically assuming the male role in their marriage. But Krasner’s influence alone would not be enough to inhibit Pollock’s agency – ultimately, that blame falls onto the media.

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[53] A school of acting opened by Lee Strasberg, student of Stanislavsky and founder of Method acting, a cousin, so to speak, to the Russian technique.
[54] Landau, 15.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Each characters from a Tennessee Williams play (*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, respectively) and famously portrayed in cinema by Marlon Brando and Paul Newman, respectively.
[57] Codell, 120.
[58] Ibid., 119.

Once Pollock achieved a basic level of success his life would be inundated by the media of all kinds. Countless reviews, op-eds, and tabloids were written about him, photographs of him working spread far beyond the borders of the art world. Two agents of the media stand out from the rest for their clear effect in altering Pollock's career: *Life* Magazine, a major publication that spoke to American values, and Hans Namuth, an individual with an insatiable need to capture Pollock's process on camera. These two entities have major roles in *Pollock* in addition to their major roles in Pollock's life, and the film adequately demonstrates their significance as turning points in shaping his career and reception.

Pollock was first brought to *Life* through an article written on a modern art roundtable that had happened in the fall of 1948. A panel of fifteen white men ranging from art critics (Clement Greenberg) to art professors (Meyer Shapiro) to, oddly enough, authors (Aldous Huxley) met to discuss their opinions on what was then the art of today.[59] Greenberg, a major proponent of Pollock, initiated conversation on the artist, and in the write-up's fourteen pages of text (interspersed with domestic-sphere advertisements), Pollock's name appeared on only one. He was discussed as one of the "Young American Extremists," a group described by the article's author as "typical, interesting, and promising."[60] The ensuing conversation was highly divisive: "while one or another member of the Table liked or disliked this or that one, few were able to state with any clarity the reasons for their likes and dislikes."[61] Pollock's work would follow suit, running the gamut of nearly every stereotypical criticism the artist would continue to receive throughout his career: "It is exquisitely painted and the color is ravishing, but I do not think it has structural design,"[62] says one, or "It seems to me like a panel for a wallpaper which

[59] Russel W. Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," *Life Magazine*, October 11, 1948, 56.
[60] Ibid., 62.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Sir Leigh Ashton, Ibid.

is repeated indefinitely around the wall,"[63] says another. James Johnson Sweeney used buzzwords such as "spontaneity," "freedom," and "expression,"[64] and quintessential of all, Shapiro is quoted with the dreaded "I suspect any picture I think I could have made myself."[65]

Despite his small inclusion in the article, Pollock would soon learn the effects of the saying "any press is good press." For less than a year later, *Life* Magazine would be at his door, preparing material for a solo, full-spread article on the artist. In understanding how this singular action would propel Pollock's career, it is important to clarify the significance *Life* had in popular American culture. Although it was frequently degraded by critics due its reliance on pictures over words, scandal over seriousness,[66] "what *Life* did have was iconic presence and cultural prestige"[67] in the hearts of its "mainly middle-class readership."[68] Its picture-heavy focus was paramount to its success – the modern American no longer had time to read; the modern American had more methods of consuming information and a need to digest it faster; the modern American was becoming more "fluent in the language of pictorial communication."[69] And as the magazine's creators would simply state, everybody likes pictures.[70] *Life* capitalized on this, favoring photojournalism with the effort to "make an effective mosaic out of the fragmentary documents which pictures... are."[71]

Life also knew photographs were powerful tools, which "if appropriately viewed and properly mastered… could shape and direct popular opinion – or the opinions that Luce[72] and

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[63] Aldous Huxley, Davenport, 62.
[64] Davenport, 62.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Erika Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 14.
[67] Ibid., 3.
[68] Ibid., 13.
[69] Ibid., 4.
[70] Robert T. Elson, *TIME INC.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise: 1923-1941*, Vol. 1 (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, Inc., 1968), 276.
[71] Ibid., 278.
[72] Henry Luce was the founder of *Life* Magazine, as well as Time Inc.

fellow Life staffers most wanted to be popular."[73] This is why its involvement in Pollock's life was so crucial – the average American, one who did not live in New York City and had no direct access to Pollock's work or person, would form an opinion on his art based solely on how it was presented in the magazine. The Celebrity Pollock would subsequently attain would be determined by the persona put forth by the magazine – a limited perspective coming from a single media source but broadcasting to a wide audience. A question arises, then: did the article promote Pollock and his work, or did it use Pollock and his work to promote specific values or "opinions?" Since "modern abstract art, and in particular the postwar styles pioneered by various American abstract expressionists, was chief among the visual tools on which Life relied to shape that citizenry,"[74] it can be said that Pollock's art was simply another means of *Life* pushing an agenda of "nationalism, capitalism, and classlessness, a sense of confidence, optimism, and exceptionalism, and the sure belief that the American way was the way of the world."[75]

Examining the article "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"[76] it is not difficult to see how this agenda was achieved. From the title alone the magazine already imbues the values of nationalism, confidence, and exceptionalism. The first paragraph quotes differing opinions on the artists' work, resembling its previously-published roundtable article. What then follows is a brief description of the artist's career so far, and his process of painting. The article uses such Degenerate terms as "scramble," "attacking," "dribbles," and "scrawls," additionally describing the artist as "brooding and doodling."[77] This description would essentially act as Pollock's first impression to the world. Before a viewer had

[73] Doss, 11.
[74] Ibid., 13.
[75] Ibid., 11.
[76] "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?," August 8, 1949, 42.
[77] Ibid., 45.

a chance to decide for themselves how to think about Pollock's work, they had already been given a list of terms which imply a sense of incompetence and childishness. As humorously noted, "if Pollock had not existed, surely *Time-Life* would have invented him,"[78] and these creative adjectives certainly denote an ability to invent.

But ultimately, *Life* is a magazine of pictures, and it is their pictures which sealed Pollock's fame and fate. The article only includes two images of the artist himself, one in color and one in black and white. The former is a full-body photograph, in which the artist leans against his painting *Number Nine*. His arms are crossed, he wears paint-splattered clothes, a cigarette hangs between his lips, and his brow is furrowed. He is the portrait of the "isolated, uncomfortable, and misunderstood"[79] artist, and in fact his body has been removed from the photograph's background, leaving his image quite literally isolated on the white page. *Life*'s use of this photograph reemphasizes the merging of artist and art seen in its Hollywood icons: here, Pollock's navy jacket and pants with white paint stains, his black shirt, his reddish shoes, and his apricot skin all match the navy, white, black, red, and apricot painting behind him. While this does make for a more visually pleasing image, this match does not allow a physical separation between Pollock and his work, compounded by the magazine's insistence on a metaphorical match as well, as seen in the article's text. As it happens, "the elements that have come to comprise Pollock's heroic persona" were elements which also described his paintings: "words like 'violent,' 'savage,' 'romantic,' 'undisciplined,' and 'explosive' were repeatedly used in the 1940s in critiques on the art" he was making.[80] In choosing this photograph to introduce Pollock

[78] Landau, 11.
[79] Strauss, 174.
[80] Landau, 11-12.

to the world, *Life* ultimately uses trope to celebritize the artist to develop an image of him that would be easier to commodify in adherence with their brand.

The next image appears three pages later and is smaller and monochromatic. A more sympathetic photo, Pollock looks calm and focused. Unwilling to proliferate that conception of the artist, *Life* captions the photo "POLLOCK DROOLS ENAMEL PAINT ON CANVAS."[81] This terminology begs the question "is dripped painting also abject, like bodily fluids?"[82] *Life* likens Pollock's unique and world-changing technique to an action most commonly performed by babies and the elderly. The single word "drools" allows uneducated readers to perpetuate Shapiro's myth that anybody can make "a Pollock," thus discrediting the artist's skill and talent. Yet at the same time, the presence of this article in *Life* at all sets Pollock apart, bestowing some sense of achievement on him. The media dangles between these two mindsets: it recognizes an artist just enough to keep him in popular culture, but devalues him enough to maintain its control over his life.

Photographer Martha Holmes took numerous pictures of Pollock throughout the day she visited his home. In addition to the several photographs she took of him painting in his studio, similar to the one eventually published in *Life*, Holmes shot a plethora of domestic and candid scenes. These images liken Pollock to the middle-class readership of the magazine, not dissimilar from the hand drawn advertisements dispersed throughout the article. Several of the photographs feature Pollock with his dog, several feature neighbors and local friends, some were posed in locations other than his house (like the general store), and a very large portion feature Krasner.[83]

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[81] "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?," 45.
[82] Codell, 128.
[83] Ben Cosgrove, "Jackson Pollock: Early Photos of the Action Painter at Work," *Time*, Accessed April 8, 2018, http://time.com/3878765/jackson-pollock-early-photos-of-the-action-painter-at-work/.

Most of the activities he performs in these photographs are "soft:" he washes dishes, he offers support, he admires animals, and he almost always is engaging with someone else. Additionally, there are photos of Pollock painting outdoors, with the sunlight brightening his face. Each of these photographs offer a gentler portrait of the artist than do the photographs selected for the magazine. They prove that the article curated an identity for the artist. There is no way to make the argument that perhaps Pollock really was as exclusively "brooding" as *Life* portrayed him to be – these photographs are clear evidence that only certain perspectives of him and his personality were chosen for public viewing. One reason why *Life* might have excluded these domestic photographs is that they show the artist with a support system, a fundamental "deal-breaker" for the Tortured Artist trope.

The narrative of the Tortured Artist shows its subject as "estranged, isolated, and in social conflict with everyone – family, lovers, other artists, the art world, and friends – as part of the misunderstood genius myth."[84] When everything else about the article – from its title to its language to its content – adheres to a theme of the misunderstood, the genius, or both, a photograph of a well-adjusted, well-integrated Pollock would stand out as an entirely different image of the artist. This begs the question, then, of why the Misunderstood Genius was chosen as a better persona than the Gentle Giant, for example – a trope occupied by similarly brusque men. The answer is that the Misunderstood Genius directly adheres to the standards of Celebrity: when "celebrities offers a myriad of different 'takes' on what is possible in consumer culture… a range of possible ways of being a human,"[85] and when a reader of *Life* magazine looks upon Pollock's image and asks "'is this me?'[86] Is this what I value?" the resulting answer is the ideal one: yes

[84] Codell, 120.
[85] Ward, 3.
[86] Ibid.

and no. The Misunderstood Pollock offers just enough to which to relate to maintain a fanbase that finds hope and pleasure in identifying with the artist. But the Genius Pollock elevates him above the populace to an ideal worthy of being worshipped, worthy of a magazine feature.

Furthermore, the Misunderstood Genius or Tortured Artist trope is easier to control, another key reason why *Life* Magazine, representative of the media, would portray Pollock in this manner. While the trope offers a digestible and simple image to an audience, "to the artist himself the myth gives some of the ancient powers and privileges of the idiot and the fool, half-prophetic creatures."[87] The Fool is likewise a stock character, commonly found in Shakespeare's plays. Although playful and silly, "very frequently he is one of the most honorable persons in the community,"[88] a "half-prophetic creature" indeed. Therefore, an audience has the power to *choose* what to accept: they can allow themselves the delight of enjoying an artists' works as they would a Fool's jokes, but they have superiority in their belief the artist is below them, their work not truly as intelligent as they proclaim it to be. "By supposing that the artist has an interesting but not always reliable relation to reality, [a viewer] is able to contain (in the military sense) what the artist tells him."[89] This ability to control, combined with an increasing cultural predisposition to celebritizing Tortured Artists as previously discussed, shows *Life* Magazine's article used text and imagery to compartmentalize Pollock in this trope to gain agency in building and shaping the Celebrity the article would therefore bestow upon him.

The simplicity of Pollock's art is also a major factor in his Celebrity. Not only was Pollock the new ideal American man, but his works represented the ideal American art, for "since there were by design no ideas in the most modern work, there could be nothing in it to

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[87] William Phillips, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Criterion Books, 1957), 505.
[88] Lucile Hoerr Charles, "The Clown's Function," *The Journal of American Folklore* 58, no. 227 (1945), https://doi.org/10.2307/535333, 32.
[89] Phillips, 506.

outrage a congressman or a customer either. It was, in that sense, an almost perfect product,"[90] perfect for the 1950s age of consumerism. The works' ambiguous nature compel an audience closer, challenging them to make their own opinions on the art. "As the paintings grew ever more resistant to interpretation, interpretation became ever more important to their success – and to their sales."[91] A large part of Pollock's intrigue was that no one could agree on him or his work, as demonstrated in *Life*'s roundtable. Critic Harold Rosenberg asserted that "the interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest,"[92] yet the ever-grasping and conflicting opinions of art critics created a drama in of itself. Since the paintings "were not really reducible to a text block and a set of captions… the obvious solution was to refer the befuddled middlebrow to the artist himself, to create cults of personality around the leaders in the field."[93] *Life* demonstrates this: if its readership would not understand Pollock's work, the clear solution would be to help them understand the artist instead. This is how the ineffable quality of Pollock's modern art helped launch his Celebrity: with so little to go on his art alone, the viewer needed his life to make sense of his productions.

The other major media element in Pollock's career is Namuth's "documentary" *Jackson Pollock 51*.[94] The term "documentary" should be interpreted loosely – although Namuth was filming without a script, and although the film does not have any fictional characters or plots, *Jackson Pollock 51* was heavily choreographed by its director. Despite its immediate reception as an honest portrayal of Pollock's process[95] it is now viewed as a deliberately-constructed

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[90] Schickel, 22.
[91] Ibid., 218.
[92] Harold Rosenberg, "The American action painters," *ARTnews* (1952): 23.
[93] Schickel, 221.
[94] Although this work is titled under many different names, this is the title which appears on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).
[95] Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 166.

portrayal of that process. Namuth's professional relationship with Pollock went beyond just *Jackson Pollock 51*; the filmmaker had first conducted a series of "photoshoots" with the artist,[96] equally enthralling to viewers and historians as his film was. In fact, after the artist's death "articles on Pollock were often illustrated with Namuth's photographs rather than the paintings,"[97] which demonstrates how influential his camera was in creating the artist's image and solidifying his legacy – "it [had] an effect beyond temporary captivation."[98] Not only was Namuth's work widely circulated, but the dramatic events surrounding its creation were as well.

Namuth expressed interest in photographing the artist in the summer of 1950.[99] This was the peak of Pollock's career, with many exciting events "continuing, beginning, ending, weaving in and out of Pollock's life as if elements in one of his own paintings."[100] He was featured in *Time*,[101] was shown in the Museum of Modern Art,[102] and most importantly, represented the United States at that year's Venice Biennale.[103] Pollock had also been sober for two years,[104] prompting many to agree he was at his most productive when he was at his least Tortured. It was perfect timing, from a documentary perspective, for Namuth to capture the artist and his process. "Lee Krasner, aware of the importance of media attention, encouraged Pollock to work with Namuth"[105] despite the artist's hesitation – "unenthusiastically, Pollock agreed."[106] Namuth

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[96] Hans Namuth, *Pollock Painting* (New York: Agrinde Publications, 1980).
[97] Sarah Boxer, "CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; The Photos That Changed Pollock's Life," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1998, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/15/arts/critic-s-notebook-the-photos-that-changed-pollock-s-life.html?pagewanted=print.
[98] Orton and Pollock, 166.
[99] Namuth.
[100] Friedman, 160.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 159.
[103] Ibid., 154.
[104] Boxer.
[105] Carolyn Kinder Carr, "Hans Namuth: Portraits," National Portrait Gallery, Accessed April 10, 2018, http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/namuth/hnintro2.htm.
[106] Ferdinand Protzman, "The Photographer's Snap Judgment," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 1999, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1999/05/23/the-photographers-snap-judgment/7062b20f-a479-4dad-af27-c1144896e6bb/?utm_term=.f9f3411d346a.

proceeded to take over 500 photographs of the artist at work but remained unsatisfied with what he had amassed; a moving picture was concluded necessary.[107]

The final product was an eleven-minute color film shot almost entirely on the exterior property of Pollock's house in Long Island.[108] It begins with the artist writing his signature and the date on a sheer glass under which the camera is filming to give the effect of Pollock writing directly on the lens. This autograph ironically attributes the film to Pollock as if one of his signed paintings rather than to Namuth, the true creator of the work. The film then begins its first main section: Pollock painting a long, horizontal canvas outdoors. As the artist is seen sitting outside his house and putting on his shoes, a monologue begins to play over the steady ticking of the film's recording. Pollock describes some basic facts of his life: "My home is in Springs, East Hampton, Long Island. I was born in Cody, Wyoming, thirty-nine years ago."[109] As the film proceeds and Pollock prepares to paint, his monologue continues on to describe his artistic process, matching the film's visuals which exhibit exactly that. A closeup shows Pollock staring at his canvas – then, unceremoniously, he begins to paint.

The monologue ends as Pollock finishes his canvas, and is replaced by an anxiety-inducing, dissonant score composed by Morton Feldman. This continues until the film fades to black a little over one third of the way through its runtime. Next, the film fades in to a montage that cuts between extreme closeups of Pollock's work and shots of the artist's shadowed silhouette throwing paint, changing locations to an indoor setting. Each time the film cuts to the art a chord is played, and each time it cuts to the artist the film is silent, save for its steady recording-tick. Pollock's shadow is incredibly distorted, highly reminiscent of the vampire's

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[107] Namuth.
[108] Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock 51*, 1951.
[109] Namuth, *Jackson Pollock 51*, 0:39.

iconic shadow as he ascends the stairs in *Nosferatu* (1922). The closeups of the canvases he is working on crossfade into closeups of his work hanging in Betty Parson's gallery, atonal score continuing throughout. Then, at just past the film's halfway mark, Pollock's face returns onscreen, looking down through the glass that once again rests above the camera lens. His speech recommences as he announces "this is the first time I am using glass as a medium,"[110] and the score begins again with a fast-paced, more harmonious melody. Pollock drips black paint onto the glass until it entirely obscures his face. He starts a second glass-painting, Namuth reuses the shot of Pollock's signature, and the film ends.

To briefly touch upon the sounds and images of the film itself, there are many cinematic elements that build Pollock a persona. Most noticeable is Feldman's score. First, it highlights the distinctly modern aspect of Pollock's painting. A peripheral member of the New York School himself, Feldman's work was often inspired by the artists working around him.[111] His scores were like abstract paintings, with their "elimination of symbolism, the simplification of gesture," and "the dramatic expansion of scale."[112] Unlike more classical music, his would immediately denote to viewers of Namuth's film a sense of unconventionalism and modernity. Next, the score likens Pollock's work to the suspense and action of a horror film, portraying him as an intense character ready to monstrously snap at any given chord. This is supplemented by Namuth's shot of the artist's hunchbacked and amorphous shadow. Despite this, the film normalizes the artist through his opening monologue in which he states simple facts about his American upbringing. Not only does he align himself with the West and with the City, he declares his association with Thomas Benton, a familiar and non-threatening American artist. Pollock mentions his study at

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[110] Ibid., 5:55.
[111] Amy C. Beal, "'Time Canvasses': Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School," in *Music and Modern Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 227.
[112] Ibid., 230.

the Arts Students League, assuring the viewer that no matter how avant-garde his painting is, its roots are in conventionalism. *Jackson Pollock 51* deliberately plays with this Quintessentially-American/Groundbreakingly-Unamerican dichotomy Pollock so readily occupies in a very distinct way.

At the beginning of the film Namuth shows a simple side of Pollock: his monologue is unoriginal and there is more motion in the wind-swept Long Island grass than in Pollock's body. Then, Pollock removes his everyday shoes to put on his *paint* shoes, and he metaphorically crosses over to the artist who slashes and splatters, one removed from convention and "unable to fit into the social order"[113] prescribed to him. An image of his work is shown for the first time, and he begins to describe the surprising details of his unique artistic process: "I don't work from drawings or color sketches,"[114] "I usually paint on the floor,"[115] "sometimes I use a brush but often prefer using a stick,"[116] and more. In creating this distinct gap between the traditional, academically-trained Pollock and the unorthodox Pollock, Namuth makes a clear statement: Pollock as a man is not inherently "savage" or "undisciplined"[117] – it is Pollock as an *artist* who occupies these qualities. Therefore, *Jackson Pollock 51* shows that it is specifically Pollock's creativity that makes him Tortured, and in it "biographical details and photographic representations combine to construct a mythic subject seemingly of and for the work."[118]

As the story goes, after Namuth called cut on his final take everything fell apart. This catastrophe was not unprecedented, as Namuth's constructed identity for Pollock was not only created in the editing room, but on set as well. Namuth would ask for several takes of specific

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[113] Codell, 118.
[114] Namuth, *Jackson Pollock 51,* 1:17.
[115] Ibid., 1:23.
[116] Ibid., 1:52.
[117] See Note 79.
[118] Orton and Pollock, 172.

moments, not allowing Pollock to move as organically as he was used to. And on that last day of filming in late October, Pollock finally showed how much it had gotten to him. "Krasner was inside the house preparing a feast to celebrate the end of filming"[119] and had invited over "ten or twelve people for dinner."[120] But "Pollock was tense... Pollock was sick of putting on his paint-spattered boots again and again for the camera, shaking an object out of one boot again and again, getting ready to paint again and again… he was ready to blow."[121] He came storming into the house and "the first thing [he] did was pour himself a tumbler of bourbon. It was the beginning of the end... soon Namuth and Pollock got into an argument – a volley of 'I'm not a phony, you're a phony.'"[122] This story is recreated in stunning detail in *Pollock*, and culminates the same way: in Pollock overturning the dinner table upon which his guests were eating.[123] Evidently, something about the process had made him incredibly unhappy, and it likely had to do with Pollock's feelings of "phoniness."

Although this collaboration "proved decisive not just for the two men but for the contemporary art world,"[124] providing a well-loved and oft-cited document of Pollock's process, it was a "Faustian bargain… the photographs that made him famous also sealed his doom."[125] Perhaps Pollock already knew "intuitively that this was the final reduction of himself to subject matter, to becoming a thing, a commodity, an entertainment."[126] If he had accepted a stereotypical perception of himself earlier, this film had taken it too far, exceeding the boundaries of the role the artist was willing to play. Namuth had used Pollock for his own art in

[119] Boxer.
[120] Friedman, 165.
[121] Boxer.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Friedman, 165.
[124] Protzman.
[125] Boxer.
[126] Fieldman, 165.

the way Pollock used paint: with little care as to how hard it fell. In fact, Namuth was admittedly unconcerned with Pollock's work at all – "the impact of [Pollock's] personality had a great deal to do with [Namuth's] relationship with [Pollock's] art,"[127] but not the impact the art itself. At the time the public was enthralled with the film, and Pollock lost connection with his audience because of it. But today historians are able to recognize that *Jackson Pollock 51* "[does] not represent the truth; [it] only [shows] a certain truth, one that codifies the artist within a certain phase of his work and bestows on him a mythic status,"[128] alienating him. And perhaps even more so than in it was in *Life* Magazine, "the figure of Jackson Pollock – action painter, dancing dripper, sullen rebel – was formed in Hans Namuth's camera. Namuth's camera helped make Pollock famous, Namuth's camera was blamed for Pollock's demise."[129]

Despite all of this press and Pollock's public success, the artist ironically had a difficult time selling works. This fact is frequently overlooked by the historians who studied him posthumously, but was an apparent fact to those who knew him personally. Eugene V. Thaw recalled that "Pollock, though he was the most discussed artist probably in the world, sold very little during his lifetime,"[130] and Greenberg notes that "the work should have sold, but in those days American painting didn't sell."[131] He described Pollock's first show after the Namuth film as a complete failure despite its inclusion of now-iconic paintings such as "Autumn Rhythm" and "Lavender Mist."[132] Betty Parsons, Pollock's dealer at the time, called the "disaster" show "heartbreaking."[133] This is an interesting phenomenon, and its justification is difficult to

[127] Hans Namuth, "Jackson Pollock," *American Society of Magazine Photographers' Picture Annual*, 1957.
[128] Berger, 40.
[129] Boxer.
[130] Thaw.
[131] Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1985), 113.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

conclude. One hypothesis as to why Pollock's Celebrity did not correlate with an increase in sales is because of Celebrity's unique relationship with Abstract Expressionism.

In a section of *Intimate Strangers* entirely devoted to the art movement, Schickel notes that

> "Abstract Expressionism is obviously the most enigmatically subjective form of painting ever invented. If it may be said to have any subject matter at all, it is the subjective state of the artist as therein. Thus, more than ever, our attention is focused on him, his moods, and his conscious in general... Meaning would be found in their personalities, in their presence."[134]

While this has clear implications as to the public's focus on artist over art, as already described, it also implies another important theory: if an artist's conscious is the subject of art, his conscious alone would need to be compelling enough to justify that art's creation. The artist's "struggle was now the one and only approved subject of the art."[135] So if Pollock's life appeared easy, if his Celebrity was overshadowing his troubles, his art no longer seemed as meaningful as it once did, and his success would inhibit his sales rather than help them. And so, with an increasing alienation from the world around him, with a "sense of having been turned into an object, not magical, but commercial, by the larger and more peripheral art world of collectors, dealers, museum people, [and] journalists,"[136] and without even the monetary satisfaction of that commercial success, Pollock retreated from this world.

The August 27, 1956 issue of *Life* Magazine published an article in their Arts section on Jackson Pollock, almost exactly seven years after "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living

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[134] Schickel, 219.
[135] Ibid., 221.
[136] Friedman, xx.

Painter in the United States?" It was titled "Rebel Artist's Tragic Ending,"[137] published two weeks after the artist's death despite that it was a weekly magazine. The article features a photograph of the aged Pollock, a calmer image of the man than it had previously used. It highlights the artist's appearance, noting his "recent growth of shaggy beard,"[138] and recalls his "stormily controversial"[139] life, barely leaving room for the most important information: Jackson Pollock had died in a car crash. Neither *Life* nor *Time*,[140] which also published a notice on the artist's death, made comment on Pollock's manslaughter of car-passenger Edith Metzger, a friend of his mistress.

In a way, a car crash was the only possible way Pollock should have died. His alcoholism would have been too damning and old age would not have made headlines. Pollock's life was part of the world of trope – it makes sense that his death would be, too. Today he "is considered the tragic hero of America's modern art," an image which had "[affirmed] itself in a modern hero's death – a car accident."[141] As mentioned, Pollock's death was glamorized by its similarity to James Dean's – already the Car Crash had made itself a motif in American culture. Within a few years abstract sculptor David Smith would die the same, followed by Grace Kelly, Lady Diana (European but American-beloved nonetheless), and most recently Paul Walker, ensuring future generations would maintain the same perception of car crashes over time. Because of this "motif," Pollock's death "was elevated to symbolism, as though it meant something more than a hunk of uncontrolled Detroit metal hitting a tree on Long Island."[142] It was a bold life unfairly cut short, truly characterized as an "accident" despite Pollock's years of mental instabilities and

[137] "Rebel Artist's Tragic Ending," *Life Magazine*, August 27, 1956, 58.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Landau, 237.
[141] Berger, 48.
[142] Hughes, 121.

struggles. No matter that the facts were unsavory – "dying at forty-four, a mean and puffy drunk with two girls in a big car"[143] – the values of American society cared more about the myth than the man. One art critic summarized the situation well:

> "His death is tragic not only because his career is cut short but because it is logical... Pollock's was the tragic, logical death of a man whose greatness and strength are precisely the qualities that led to a death that could have been avoided if he had not been so strong, or had been willing to compromise, or step backwards, or hold some strength in reserve – in other words, if he had not been Jackson Pollock."[144]

[143] Ibid.
[144] Berger, 48.

Chapter II. *Pollock*

Even though half you people got a fuckin' problem with me, you hate it but you know respect you've got to give me – Eminem

i. Background

Somehow, Ed Harris made it through thirty-six years of life without becoming familiar with Jackson Pollock's work.[145] It was his father who introduced the artist to the actor, sending him a copy of Jeffrey Potter's immense anthology *To A Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock.*[146] His father only did this because he thought there was a resemblance between the two men, but nonetheless told Harris that "maybe there was a movie in it."[147] When Harris started reading the book he found himself drawn to Pollock and "his struggles as a person even more so than his art."[148] He continued to read and learn, quickly realizing that he wanted to make this story a film.[149] But it was not for ten years that his desire would manifest into a completed project. In the meantime, Harris grew more and more attached to the idea of this film, building a studio on his property in which to paint,[150] pursuing an acquisition of the story's rights, signing on as director and leading actor, and eventually fronting his own money to help with production, an admitted taboo and bad idea.[151] All of this would come to fruition when *Pollock*, the

[145] Ed Harris, interview by Charlie Rose, *Ed Harris*, Charlie Rose, February 8, 2001, https://charlierose.com/videos/656.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ruthe Stein, "A 10-Year Obsession With 'Pollock' / Ed Harris Gets Oscar Nomination for Acting in His Directing Debut," *SFGate*, February 18, 2001, http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/A-10-Year-Obsession-With-Pollock-Ed-Harris-2951040.php.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ed Harris, interview by Susan Stamberg, *Interview: Ed Harris on his new film "Pollock,"* Morning Edition, NPR, March 8, 2001, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A166069906/AONE?u=mlin_m_tufts&sid=AONE&xid=1f2d6f8d
[150] Ibid.
[151] Stein.

completed film, earned two Academy Award nominations, including Best Actor for Harris himself.

When asked what it was that "reached out and grabbed"[152] his attention, Harris said it was how "this young man growing up in the Southwest… found this way of expressing himself that gave his life purpose."[153] Because of this approach, "the film isn't a study of the painting. It's about [Pollock] and what he's trying to do at some level."[154] It is a relationship-heavy biography of Pollock's career as an artist from the day he meets Lee Krasner, his future wife, to the day he dies. In fact, among all the relationships in the film, that between Pollock and Krasner is central. *Pollock* reveals moments of intimacy and strife between the two artists, set against the backdrop of an encroaching media presence. Krasner is heavily portrayed as the reason Pollock is able to accomplish any task, in setting up meetings between him and gallerists, relocating their home to better accommodate his art, and not faltering once any time their work is directly compared and her husband's comes up superior. Of all the pro-Pollock voices in their lives, from Clement Greenberg to *Life* Magazine, Krasner's is the loudest, even after their relationship has fallen to shambles. The film questions whether her actions, supportive as they may have been, were truly the best for Pollock's life regardless of their positive effect on his career. Furthermore, it examines how the two – life and career – intertwined to create art.

Despite Harris' insistence that he and Pollock are more different than they are alike, there are certain noticeable similarities between the two men and between Harris' process in creating *Pollock* and his character's process in making his art. Harris married a fellow actor just as Pollock married a fellow artist. Harris was in his late 30s when he began working on the film

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[152] Harris and Stamberg.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ed Harris, interview by Cynthia Fuchs, *Pollock – An Intuitive Journey*, Nitrate Online, February 23, 2001, http://www.nitrateonline.com/2001/fpollock.html.

which mostly covered Pollock in his late 30s. For the ways in which they were not already alike, Harris transformed himself, "[learning] to paint like Pollock and even [putting] on 30 pounds to be convincing as the artist in his nasty-middle-aged-drunk years."[155] His approach was just shy of method-acting (a technique birthed from those of Pollock's time), from which he was saved by his role as director. Harris has said that had he not been required to step out of character frequently for this reason, he "[doesn't] know where [he] might have ended up,"[156] likely referring to Pollock's institutionalization or death. Both the actor and the artist smoke cigarettes, Harris using them as a release from his public persona.[157] And ultimately, the career-changing attention Harris received at *Pollock*'s release is a parallel to that which the artist received as portrayed in the film itself. A well-liked but sidelined actor prior to this endeavor, Harris proved himself worthy of leading roles and directing all at once.

In most films it is difficult to credit only one author as films are shaped by so many people on a narrative and stylistic level. While many attribute a film's authorship to the director, who has the majority of the creative control on a project, doing so ignores the critical contributions screenwriters and editors make independent of a director's vision, not to mention a producer's grip on issues such as censorship, budget, and the creative team. However, *Pollock* will furthermore be treated as Harris' creation. As not only director, but a producer and leading actor, Harris' involvement in the film was greater that the involvement most directors have in their films. Additionally, because the story concept stemmed from Harris' interests he was active during its writing process, admitting he frequently edited and made stylistic changes to the script. Because of Harris' many roles, *Pollock* "is strongly shaped by the knowledge and interpretation

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[155] Stein.
[156] Braden Phillips, "Ed Harris 'Pollock,'" *Variety*, January 14, 2001, http://variety.com/2001/film/awards/ed-harris-1117791837/.
[157] Stein.

of one single person."[158] Therefore, any conclusions that can be made about the film's message or effect will be attributed to him.

Authorship may also be linked to Celebrity. Harris' embodiment of Pollock has a symbolic meaning deeper than his physical resemblance: "on the one hand, biographical characters can be understood as stars in reality; on the other hand biopic protagonists are often portrayed by filmstars which can lead to interesting problems of impersonation."[159] Pollock's character in the film therefore becomes a double-celebrity, and his dialogue has two authors. It can be difficult at moments to discern where Harris ends and Pollock begins, where fact dissipates and fiction takes over. Although a few years before the age of Stans,[160] it is additionally likely that many audience members chose to watch *Pollock* for Harris' involvement, rather than its subject matter. This would be especially true after its successful Oscar campaign. Therefore, there is an entire audience who has no knowledge on Pollock; when they watch the film they are not seeing a historical figure come to life, but rather a celebrity acting as a character. As will be made clear, *Pollock* is a film of dualities, and this is one more. The author of the film embodies an identity who is in turn the author of an entity. In a time when consumers "[have] attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author,"[161] the film navigates a fictional world which shows that idolatry, while is simultaneously reflective of that idolatry.

Pollock is a thematically rich film which uses the artist's life narrative to shed light on topics such as mental illness and addiction, isolation and connection, and the particularly complicated topics of masculinity and feminism. While all compelling themes and ones which

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[158] Berger, 40.
[159] Ibid., 15.
[160] A term used to describe the new-age Superfan; one who would, for example, watch a film in which they had no interest solely to support an actor's involvement in it.
[161] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 143.

will be briefly analyzed, *Pollock*'s unique focus on the media and Celebrity will make up the brunt of this chapter's discussion. The script is rife with appearances, either in person or in mention, of critics, dealers, artists, interviewers, radio hosts, and more. Pollock's spread in *Life* magazine is faithfully recreated, as are the words he speaks to William Wright in a 1950 interview.[162] As omnipotent as Krasner is in the film at every twist and turn in Pollock's career, so too is the media, mentally and physically invading Pollock's home and studio. In fact, as the film progresses Krasner and The Media almost blend in their roles, further complicating *Pollock*'s depiction of women. Harris paid special attention to the accuracy of details in the film's props, cinematography, costuming, and more. Each time a camera appears onscreen (in taking still photographs for *Life*'s article or for Ruth Kligman's pleasure, or in filming Pollock's action-filled process), the actors wear the exact costumes their real-life counterparts did and pose in the same positions as in the subsequently published images. Harris' commitment to realism offers the audience as clear an image of the effects of media as is possible in a film, one who's priority is offering entertainment. However, Peter Brant, one of the film's producers, has admitted that "even if the story is not a hundred percent accurate, even if the story is more romantic than historically exact, it is an inspiration. You see the artist in a very noble light, you see that he or she is very human."[163] Here he directly acknowledges that *Pollock* sometimes romanticizes the artist to portray him in a particular "light." Like *Life* and Namuth before it, the film must be understood as an interpretation of the artist's life, not a documentation. The task at hand is now to examine how these elements of accuracy, romanticism, history, nobility, and above all else, humanity, combine to convey a message through *Pollock.*

[162] Jackson Pollock, interview by William Wright, *Interview with William Wright*, Radio Station Weri, 1951.
[163] Berger, 8.

ii. Biopic: Portrait of a Genre

Literature has the biography, painting has the portrait, and film has the biopic. Biopic, an abridged title for the genre of biographical motion pictures, is not unique to any stock character or moment in history. In fact, the subject of a biopic need not even be a celebrity. The broad genre can range in tone from the dramatic like *Lincoln* (2012), to the comedic like *I, Tonya* (2017). They can be period pieces, as is *The King's Speech* (2010), or portrayals of recent events, as is *The Social Network* (2010). Sometimes a romance develops in the plot simply to better showcase a protagonist, as seen in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), and sometimes the romance blurs which character exactly *is* the protagonist, as seen in *The Theory of Everything* (2014). Altogether, these examples should demonstrate just how popular the genre is, as they were all made in the last 20 years and have dominated cinemas and award shows. More than a historical film which exhibits an unfamiliar time and way of living, biopics delve deeply into the mind and life of a singular person, focusing on how their life was shaped *by* their times, and how their life *shaped* their times.

Most importantly, biopics are reflections of a modern society's values. While this can be said of films across genres, the immediate connection with an actual human life forces a viewer to consider how they would have interacted with the protagonist in a more meaningful way than they would with a decidedly fictional character. If the protagonist is recent enough, a viewer might even consider how their parents or grandparents reacted to the depicted life. Therefore, a person's values are directly challenged and questioned in the realization that it is only time – not an alternate reality – which separates one from the characters of the film. What a viewer agrees and disagrees with demonstrates the values of the society in which they were raised. When these

"films tell us as much about the past as they are showing perceptions of it in the present,"[164] they become a chosen and cultivated history. For example, a biopic on Lenin made in postwar Russia would narrate entirely differently than one made in today's America. Both could use the exact same facts, but inevitably would tell different stories to reflect their unique cultures and morals.

As previously discussed, celebrities are also signifiers of a society's values, so it makes sense that history, ethics, and Celebrity would all clash into the popular medium of a biopic. What typically results is trope: yet another device used to subliminally demonstrate a society's values. Rather than revealing an unforetold story, biopics simply show what an audience already wants to see. Rarely do they provoke or discomfort, but instead inspire and evoke sympathy. An artist like van Gogh has a strong hold in the hearts of today's art lovers. So instead of challenging that untainted view of him, films featuring the artist, of which there are many, use his negative qualities to further endear him to an audience. For example, the most recent van-Gogh-biopic, *Loving Vincent* (2017), portrays the artist's love of his brother as exquisitely melancholic, rather than obsessive. It would be almost unthinkable to spend countless hours, filmmakers, and cash to make a film on a historical figure that ultimately viewed them as unworthy of admiration. Previously mentioned films *The Social Network* and *I, Tonya* both feature controversial figures in recent American history and do not shy away from portraying their subjects' unfavorable qualities, but nevertheless imbue their films with moments begging for empathy. Biopics ask America to love these previously-misunderstood figures but would never ask it to disavow those previously-adored.

[164] Berger, 2.

Biopics on artists have particular deviations from the genre's broad standards and have many commonalities among themselves, a result of their subjects' identical vocations and the use of clichés like the Tortured Artist. Consider the following analysis:

> "Many of these films start *in media res* at mid-career and use flashbacks to recall artists' beginnings… Another theme of these films is that artists are estranged, isolated, and in social conflict with everyone – family, lovers, other artists, the art world, and friends – as part of the misunderstood genius myth. Their estrangement is the obverse of their extreme individuality, which marks their work as unique and authentic, while also fueling public hostility and instigating their downfall. In the melodrama deployed by this estrangement trope, artists appear hysterical, demanding, moody, and manic, an 'aesthetic of victimization.'"[165]

All of this is certainly true of *Pollock*, and many other artist biopics. This repetitive narrative is the epitome of how America views its creatives. And since history is becoming increasingly defined as the *widespread information* on the past rather than the *facts* of the past itself, when the subject of a biopic is an artist the film demonstrates more than just American values, but a "projected art history" – "an amalgamation of image and narrative in film."[166] The historiography of Art History is proof that the subject is delicate and easily malleable. A field once exclusive to biography through Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* transformed into an exclusively iconographical approach by the time Panofsky mastered it. Hollywood's relentless interest in artists suggests a return to the subject's Vasarian origin in the mind of the average American. When Ed Harris dismissed the idea of making *Pollock* an "art history lesson," it was accurately

[165] Codell, 120.
[166] Berger, 3.

noted that nonetheless "the politics of representation that are expressed in this film have a distinctive influence on… popular art historical knowledge and therefore always remain a sort of 'art history lesson' as well."[167]

This is why biopics have a responsibility to reject trope at all costs. When the stakes are the future of Art History, dramatic value should not be the sole determinant of a film's narrative. But ultimately, "the industry [has] concerns for distribution that first of all concentrate on whether it will meet the demands of the mass market."[168] Therefore, artistic effect is usually sacrificed for a film's mass appeal. This is not wholly negative, though. While an artist might be popularly misrepresented, their life and work is nonetheless being spread. It is the exact conundrum Pollock and Rothko faced in accepting a media presence in their lives. Ed Harris' unfathomable lack of knowledge on Pollock is ultimately not that unfathomable; Americans are not as easily exposed to visual artists as they are to actors and musicians. If the options are a singularly-focused conception of an artist versus no conception at all, the former seems a competent option.

What results is a Projected Art History that aims to be palatable above all else. The elements of a biopic are "often based on myths"[169] such as unrecognized genius and the high price of creativity. Of particular interest is the dissonance between a palatable concept and an appealing character. Chiefly, the greatest myth found in artist biopics is the Tortured Artist and its variations; the portrayal of a man unrestrained in his addictions, sadness, sexuality, and anger. While this character is the adverse of a modern American ethical ideal, it nonetheless is the most *comprehensible* configuration of an artist. Its origins lie farther than the history of trope, sourcing

[167] Ibid., 43.
[168] Ibid., 8.
[169] Ibid., 11.

as far back as Plato's concept of "creative insanity – that inspired madness"[170] or the "divine madness" found in artists. This terminology accepts the artist's chaos as a necessary means of creating. Regardless of the Tortured Artist trope's limitations, it is a concept that has endured, and therefore is the concept most accepted by American audiences. Whereas in a traditional biopic the subject might operate under the tropes of a hero, in the artist's biopic "heroics are replaced by 'psychological, sexual, and pharmacological examinations of subjects' lives.'"[171] Despite how *Pollock* "follows its inherent mechanisms and sometimes has a hard time escaping certain patterns of representation,"[172] "this film is unusually well informed about art historical interpretations in comparison to other biopics."[173]

iii. Media within Media

Rarely is a film as tightly wound in self-referential ekphrasis as is *Pollock.* Not only is it a highly stylized film (for mainstream Hollywood) about a biographical artist, but its characters are entrenched in the effects of the media that dominates its plot. Whereas a historically-based action movie, for example, would have many incongruous parts (the technology of filmmaking against the simplicity of history against the theatrics of a fight sequence), every aspect of *Pollock*'s creation works together, visually reading like a documentary. It is the result of artists and writers (filmmakers and screenwriters) using their talents to reveal the world of artists and writers (painters and journalists). As a form of widespread communication the film is part of the media it depicts. Any statement it makes about art is a statement unto itself, any claim it makes

[170] Rudolf Wittkower and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 98.
[171] Codell, 119.
[172] Berger, 43.
[173] Ibid.

about the media is a claim it, too, must bear. Harris' deep presence in the film's creation aids this notion, adding artistic legitimacy to the film – a product of an industry too-often dominated by illegitimate artists. When directors of this genre abandon entertainment for artistic style but lack the honesty and vulnerability to truly be artistic, their film will fall flat. Harris is not one of the directors simply "making a classy flick about the kind of real artist they themselves might be if they made classy flicks about real artists"[174] – he has a clear emotional and personal investment in the project that achieves a level of artistry in his medium that a beginning Jackson Pollock achieved in his.

Nonetheless, this art is still media, just as Martha Holmes' beautiful photographs of Pollock became since being published in *Life* Magazine. These interwoven elements of art and media complicate *Pollock*'s message: while on the surface it asks us to condemn the latter, doing so would force us to condemn the film as well. A press-presence saturates the film in every moment. Its first scene reveals Pollock's famous *Life* article. The third is overlaid with a war-time radio broadcast. The first non-family character introduced to the narrative is Howard Putzel, a former art critic.[175] This pattern continues: the film can never go too long without name-dropping a writer or having a character read a review. Harris is clearly making a claim about how the media affected Pollock's life and career, but in making that claim through film he becomes complicit in whatever conclusion the film draws. Using a form of media to demonstrate those effects inherently implies the film itself will have an affect on the same, alerting the audience to a form of double-victimization established by *Pollock.* It perpetuates the process is portrays.

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[174] Peter Plagens, "Biopics Mix Shticks, Kitsch," *ARTnews*, December 1, 2006, http://www.artnews.com/2006/12/01/biopics-mix-shticks-kitsch/.
[175] Landau, 103.

Not only are the agents of the media shown in *Pollock*, but its physical traces are as well. The cool-toned black and white photos that intercut Pollock's *Life* interview are posed replicas of the historic photos themselves. As previously mentioned, Harris and Marcia Gay Harden, the actress who plays Lee Krasner, wear the exact clothes their characters' real-life counterparts wore in the photos. They stand in the same positions and are framed in the same spaces. Here is a moment where Harris' art-and-media scale tips heavily in the latter's direction – in fact his only creative choice is to adhere to documentary-like accuracy. Interestingly, many of the photos included in the film were those not published in the *Life* article, offering the film's viewers an extended behind-the-scenes look that essentially encapsulates the film itself. This has the intent of highlighting the choices the media made in the artist's life, not only showing what happened during those years, but what did not happen, and what could have happened. This effect is used again during the scenes depicting Namuth's documentary. In these moments *Pollock* alternates between its standard 16:9, slightly-faded, cool cinematography and a 4:3, round-edged, warm filmstock that emulates that of *Jackson Pollock 51*. Once again, *Pollock* shows an unedited version of this historical piece of media. Namuth talks over what would eventually become an unused take, giving directions like "Go to the chair,"[176] "sit down,"[177] and "don't talk."[178] These ekphrastic references will be analyzed to understand what claims *Pollock* makes about the media and celebrity.

The film's first large-scale foray into media representation comes just past its half-way mark. Pollock had recently "discovered" his drip painting technique and gotten sober when he receives a call from *Life* Magazine, interested in writing an article about him. Dorothy Seiberling

[176] Harris, 1:26:26.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., 1:26:40.

and Martha Holmes arrive at Springs, conducting an interview and candidly-posed photoshoot simultaneously. Not only did many of the ensuing photographs never appear in the pages of *Life*, but nearly none of the conversation between Harris' character and his interviewer makes it into the article. This shows *Pollock*'s interest in depicting the effect of media more so than the realities of media. Anyone can read Pollock's spread in *Life* today and learn what was said about him – what this film offers instead is watching the characters crumble or thrive in its presence. While a book can explain the media's role in the artist's life as well, the medium of film has unique qualities that make it better able to do the same: in addition to words, films have images.

Noted earlier, *Pollock* is a stylized film which takes advantage of its medium-specific elements of image composition and duration, sound, and most importantly – the cut. What begins as a traditional narrative scene – a standard wide establishing shot with exclusively diegetic sound – quickly transforms into genre-bending montage unlike anything previously shown in the film. As the spoken words of the conversation continue in the audiotrack, the filmed footage of the imagetrack cuts out entirely, replaced instead with still images. Four photographs are sequentially held on screen for about two seconds each, accompanied by an exaggerated shutter sound. The first image, appearing right after photographer Holmes looks through her viewfinder telling the couple to "hold it a minute there,"[179] could at first glance be the result of what she captured in that moment. Pollock and Krasner are mid-step on an exterior landscape, positioned in the same way they are when Holmes tells them to pause. But Krasner wears an overcoat in the still image she does not wear in the scene, indicating that a jump in time has occurred. Each of the following photographs are increasingly farther away, in time and setting, from the audibly

[179] Ibid., 1:15:53.

ongoing interview. They feature costumes, characters, and locations yet unseen in the scene, before jarringly returning to the interview's filmed footage.

The rest of the scene continues "normally," although it remains in the stylized aesthetic of *Pollock*. Longer takes are used, favoring the use of handheld panning to show dialogue and reaction, rather than cutting shot-reverse-shot. Generally the camera gives equal screen time to those talking, letting the viewer acquaint themselves to the conversation as if they were following it in person. At one key moment, however, the camera deviates from this pattern, tracking in to a closeup on Holmes' camera. The prop is held against her torso, which occupies most of the frame by the end of the shot. The shot lasts only for a beat, cutting at the moment the shutter snaps, and although it is unique as the only shot devoid of human face in this scene, it could be forgotten if not for the fact that it is later repeated. Only two shots later the film's camera once again closes in on that of Holmes, holding through and after her shutter clicks. Occupying the entire frame this time, the camera's aperture, its all-seeing eye, is much more ominous. In fact, this shot – both *of Pollock* and *in Pollock* – anticipates the artist's career decay and physical death.

To understand this a brief digression into the work of Roland Barthes must be made. A connection between Celebrity and religion was earlier touched upon, noting that celebrities have become reminiscent of gods. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes likewise notes that religion has been eliminated and replaced in modern society, looking at its effect on photography: "Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual."[180] Barthes' "thesis of death

[180] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, 3rd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 92.

by the act of being photographed"[181] stems from the idea of objectification: subject becomes object when "shot" or "captured" by a camera. This is compounded when the subject is *aware* of their capture. In everyday life people cannot help but react, even if minutely, to the knowledge they are being photographed. Barthes describes this process' effect on his person:

> "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself into an image… In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."[182]

Of all four men he claims to be, none of them are actually himself (the closest is the man he *thinks* he is). In his awareness of his imminent capture, he "makes another body," losing part of himself in the process.

Barthes does not let the photographer get away without partial blame for this loss, however, acknowledging that he is both who the photographer *thinks* he is, and who the photographer *wants him to be*. This directly adheres to the media's process of constructing identities and consequently establishing trope. Barthes says "I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it according to its caprice,"[183] but that is giving too much agency to the abiotic photograph. Instead, his body is mortified through the caprice of the photographer. The photographer does this through two means: by denying the subject his true life in choosing instead their own idea of the subject, and by transforming the *now* of the moment into that which *has been*, or – "*That-has-been*," Barthes' *noeme* for photography.[184] Returning to *Pollock*, it is

[181] Berger, 70.
[182] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10-11, 13.
[183] Ibid., 10-11.
[184] Ibid., 77.

now clear why the closeups on the camera feel so ominous – they are focusing on a moment of death. Pollock has lost control of his person, captive instead to the whims of the media. Aware of his posing as Barthes was, he concedes to these whims, himself complicit in his own destruction and agreeing to cooperate with his identity's new construction. And his art, so of the present moment, moves into the past as soon as the shutter snaps. The film continues to show Pollock's gradual, media-induced decline in which he is both victim and agent, culminating in the dramatic act of suicide and the dual roles of killer and killed. This moment, the closeup on the camera which will immortalize the artist in a soon-to-be iconic article, is the beginning of his end, the point of no return, and an ironically mortalizing moment indeed.

This central scene is not the first nor the last time *Life* makes an appearance in the film. Only a few scenes earlier Pollock confronts Clement Greenberg, shown in equal parts as the renowned art critic he is and as friend, familiarly referred to as "Clem" throughout. When challenged as to why the artist is still struggling despite Greenberg's faith that Pollock is the greatest living painter (a quote *Life* would steal to title its article), Greenberg responds that he "just took part in a roundtable on modern art held by Life magazine for God's sakes!"[185] The way in which he says this implies that he can do nothing greater for Pollock than to discuss him with this publication. The sentiment simplifies to *"I'm doing* this *for you – what else could I possibly be doing better?"* As previously examined, *Life* was the pinnacle of pop culture, the shell into which the artist was trying to break. If the film's viewer had any doubts as to the importance of Pollock's inclusion in the magazine, hearing Greenberg – who has been established as a voice of intellectual authority – say this line cements an understanding that Pollock has achieved total success through the article's publication.

[185] Harris, 1:10:33.

Most important to *Pollock*'s statements on Celebrity through *Life*, however, are the two scenes in Betty Parson's Gallery. Essentially, they are the same scene repeated at different points in the film, although the scene extends the second time it is shown. The very first shot of *Pollock* is an image of a woman holding *Life* Magazine, its red logo the first shock of color after the roll of opening credits of white text against a black screen. The shot continues and the woman opens the magazine, revealing its back cover emblazoned with the word "LUCKIEST" above an image of a man. As the pages open Pollock's article comes into view, and although it is small, this is the first time the artist's image appears in the film. Pollock's hands enter frame which, suited-up, sign the outstretched article with a marker. Combined with the scene's increasing sounds of bright and polite chatter, a sense of fame immediately enters the film. The camera tilts up, unveiling Harris-as-Pollock, and a flash goes off from somewhere within the crowd, comprised of well-dressed people who cannot take their eyes off the artist. Pollock looks up past the camera with a pained expression, and the scene fades to black.

This scene was not intended to open the film. Harris had completed a cut he was happy with and began work on another film project.[186] After taking some time away from *Pollock* he watched it again with fresh eyes and realized it still needed shaping. He sent it to another prominent editor in the industry for feedback, who advised Harris on "putting the film more in an art world context… giving it a context through its structure."[187] This scene certainly establishes the art world, but it furthermore establishes Celebrity. After watching this scene the unknowing viewer (like Harris at thirty-six) would only know one thing about Pollock: that at some point in his life he gained Celebrity. The article is not shown clearly enough to even demonstrate that he is a painter. The clothes he wears, fit for the gallery opening he is attending, belie his usual

[186] Berger, 145.
[187] Ibid.

grime. Above all else and before all else, *Pollock* portrays its eponymous character as a celebrity. The scene fades to black leaving the viewer to wonder what the artist was staring at, and because of this he is only shown as *successful*, with no indication of what toll Celebrity might have taken on him, at what cost he has gained this success, or who he has lost in the process.

Who he has lost is, of course, Krasner, the object of his gaze. This is revealed the second time the scene plays out, chronologically in the narrative and arriving at the three-quarters mark of the film. After a violent outburst at Thanksgiving, the camera pans across the agitated splashes of black in Pollock's new works, which hang in a gallery. It is the same gallery as the first scene, although now it is given a time and location: Betty Parsons Gallery, November 28, 1950. This is one year after Pollock's previous show in the gallery, which opened not long after the publication of his *Life* article. The camera zooms into one of the drip paintings, crossfading into the first scene's opening (and only) shot, and the bright thematic music which played in the original scene fades so only the chatter – echoed and cold – remains. Pollock stares past the camera, and the shot cuts for the first time, revealing a well-dressed Krasner engaged in conversation. She looks over, establishing eye contact, and the film cuts back to Pollock in a closeup. Cutting between the two, Krasner's smile fades as Pollock's eyebrows raise. As painters, they fittingly do not need words to communicate their feelings with one another.

Repeating this scene so late in the film twists entirely the viewer's outlook on it. By now Pollock has relapsed into his alcoholism, has fought fiercely with his wife, and has grown uncomfortable with his fame, thinking himself a "phony." This scene is in fact the last time he is shown as an artist, as the film's five-year time-jump in the next scene reveals him as a has-been. When the camera captures *Life*'s "luckiest" man on its back cover, the viewer now knows this is not a reference to Pollock, but an ironic coincidence. His clean-cut suit contrasts from the image

of him the viewer has come to know and represents conformity, not class. And above all, this scene is no longer about the successful Pollock, but the celebrity who has so entirely lost himself that is he unable to connect with the one person who was always able to get through to him. Krasner is the embodiment of Pollock's downfall as orchestrated by the media that raised him up in the first place. In duplicating and extending the film's opening scene to reveal Krasner in this way, *Pollock* ultimately displays the ruining effect the media has on its eponymous protagonist. It provides a direct comparison between the viewer's opinion on Pollock before and after understanding the media's presence in his life, from when he was a lucky man to a Tortured Artist.

The next important piece of large-scale media represented in *Pollock* is *Jackson Pollock 51*, Namuth's documentary short. As mentioned, its scene[188] in the film alternates between a third-party observation of the making of the short, and a recreation of the short itself. But in these moments of recreation, *Pollock* lacks the attention to detail it usually prioritizes. Not only are the camera shots and character actions slightly different, but in the beginning of the scene Pollock even wears a different shirt than his real-life counterpart did. In Namuth's film Pollock is in all black, in Harris' he wears a white t-shirt. This purposeful discrepancy emphasizes the film-star/art-star binary Berger discusses,[189] alerting the viewer that this is Harris playing Pollock, not Pollock himself. This underscores the theme of staging and dishonesty within the scene itself, likening Harris' act of pretending onscreen to Pollock's.

And *Pollock* is forthcoming in its assertion that the Namuth film was staged. The scene begins with a voiceover of the photographer saying "okay we're rolling, now come back in!"[190]

[188] It should be noted that the Namuth "scene" is not a scene at all, but a section in the film, as it is intercut with other short scenes.
[189] See Note 155.
[190] Harris, 1:26:16.

Pollock enters frame and Namuth continues to direct him to sit in the chair, put on his shoes, and lift his head. At this point in the film, an audience member who has never seen *Jackson Pollock 51* might assume it was non-documentary, perhaps more of a staged art film. Not only does Namuth dictate Pollock's motions, but he impedes on his artistic process. At one point in the scene Namuth yells "cut" repeatedly until Pollock finally comes out of his painting-induced trance. Completely unaware that Pollock is painting "for real," and not just for the film's sake, Namuth gives an indifferent shrug and walks away. It is only when Pollock starts discussing his unhappiness with those around him that *Jackson Pollock 51* is fully clarified as an intended documentary, not staged film as it is perceived to be.

Pollock first talks to his wife, telling her he "[feels] like a phony."[191] She ignores his metaphorically outstretched hand, with her oft-said "you're a great painter, Pollock. Just paint."[192] After an exterior shot of Pollock looking down at his canvas, tortured expression on his face and blurred-figure of Namuth behind him, an intimate scene unfolds between Pollock and Greenberg. They sit in Pollock's stalled car discussing more than just the documentary, but Pollock's ever-increasing fame. Once again when Pollock expresses clear contempt for the project, Greenberg shrugs and nonchalantly says "you're the star,"[193] as if to say "so it goes." Neither family nor friend show sympathy for Pollock's plight, blaming him for his own woes. They imply he should have known that "phoniness" comes with fame. Greenberg attempts to remind Pollock of his genuine artistic talent, speaking of the upcoming show mentioned in Chapter One. He gives it his utmost faith, saying "I think it's gonna be your best show ever, Jackson. Everything works… it's phenomenal." But he follows that statement with the

[191] Ibid., 1:29:16.
[192] Ibid., 1:29:21.
[193] Ibid., 1:30:01.

unfortunate truth: "I don't think it's going to sell, though."[194] Pollock had sealed his fate, and he finishes out the film shoot despite his increasing irritation.

The Namuth saga concludes in near-perfect detail. Just as happened historically, in *Pollock* the filming ends, the artist enters the dinner party, he pours himself a drink, and eventually overturns the dinner table. The script emphasizes the importance of Pollock's drink through the guests' nervous glances as the artist announces: "first drink I've had in two years."[195] Many of Pollock's quotes are historically accurate in this scene, most notably his desperate rumbling in Namuth's ear "I'm not a phony, you're a phony"[196] and his bellowing "now?"[197] as he upends the table. The guests are shocked and uncomfortable, completely unable to see the artist's pain. Immediately after this moment the camera cuts to the Betty Parsons gallery, recreating the shots from Namuth's film that pan across the artwork.

Pollock's restaging of both this moment in the artist's life as well as the *Jackson Pollock 51* film itself primarily serves to demystify (or specifically, de*myth*ify) the artist. Regarding Namuth's film, it has been accurately noted that historically "one person's fiction is another's vivid image of a man and his methods; one person's bit of theatre is another's documentation."[198] *Pollock* reinterprets the narrative that ever-shifts between the fulcrum of theatre and documentation, asserting that Namuth's film belongs in the former category. First, *Pollock* shows that the process was choreographed, and not a natural recording of the artist's methods. Namuth was clearly aiming for a certain message and perception, and at one point in the film Pollock laments that Namuth "wants to get it right."[199] In a real documentary, of course,

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[194] Ibid., 1:30:36.
[195] Ibid., 1:33:02.
[196] See Note 118.
[197] Boxer.
[198] Orton and Pollock, 167.
[199] Harris, 1:29:00.

getting it right or wrong is not a concern of the production process beyond the filmmaker's need to acquire a range of legible footage. The shaping of the narrative happens in the edit, not in the contents of a person's life. Namuth's film "mediates historical actuality,"[200] and *Pollock*'s inclusion of this process hopes to regain some of that actuality in highlighting the process' engineering.

Through its heavy focus on Pollock's emotional state the film also demythifies the artist by demonstrating the emotional toll *Jackson Pollock 51* took on him. Although Namuth's "films helped transform Pollock from a talented, cranky loner into the first media-driven superstar of American contemporary art, the jeans-clad, chain-smoking poster boy of abstract expressionism,"[201] *Pollock* argues that the artist did not feel like much of a poster boy himself: the Celebrity "thrust upon" him[202] was not indicative of his personality and should not be seen as such. There was a dissonance between the Pollock the media created and the Pollock born in the West, and the film gives them both ample screen-time to examine the ways in which they were different. The moment Pollock takes his first drink seems to demonstrate the artist's knowledge of these warring identities within him. Pollock knows the media does not want to see the part of him that hates his fame, or the part of him that cares about other peoples' feelings.[203] He is permitted to express emotions, but those emotions must be limited to melancholy or anger. Thus, Pollock caves, accepting the life pushed upon him. He challenges the media, reclaiming agency in a sense – if they want an unrestrained Bad Boy, an unrestrained Bad Boy they would get.

The final important media presence in *Pollock* comes from an unlikely and subliminal source: Lee Krasner herself. Upon review, *Pollock*'s media is largely comprised of women, just

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[200] Ibid., 172.
[201] Protzman.
[202] See Note 6.
[203] Harris, 1:28:56.

as women were largely responsible for Pollock's career. Their voices are hushed under those of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Hans Namuth, the men who are thought to have launched the artist to fame, but without women Pollock would have never achieved the mainstream success he did. Even *Pollock* itself was written by two women (Barbara Turner and Susan Emshwiller) whose names are nowhere near as cited in reviews as is Harris'. Consider Krasner, Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons, Dorothy Seiberling, Martha Holmes, and Ruth Kligman:[204] each of these women had a hand in shaping Pollock's life and therefore career, and each are shown in conjunction with some sort of media in the film. While irrelevant to the main thesis of this paper, it is interesting to note that two thirds of these women were Jewish and committed part of their lives to upholding Jackson Pollock's "identity as a white man born in America with a Christian background… as the ideal figure for a post-war American artist."[205] Due to her proximity to Pollock in life, and to her abundant appearances in the film, Krasner is the representative of the female-dominated media, and eventually morphs into the media itself.

It has already been concluded that the media's role in *Pollock* is to shape the artist's career and life, disallowing him that ability. Although Krasner uses different tactics than the media she nonetheless achieves similar effects. A central theme of *Pollock* is the artist's rise and fall, as established from its opening scene and reiterated in the following two-hour runtime. But *Pollock* is just as equally about his relationship with Krasner, demonstrated by the film's timeline: his life spent with the other artist from the day they meet to the day they part. And this relationship undergoes the same trajectory Pollock's does with the media: curiosity, obsession, destruction; a rise and a fall. Therefore, although Krasner is not a member of the media herself,

[204] Kligman's role in Pollock's life is clear to those familiar with her – she was his mistress and sole survivor of his fatal car crash. What was her role in Pollock-related media? She posed the last photograph of him ever taken, restaged in the film.
[205] Berger, 32.

her role aligns with it in such a way that – combined with the two "characters'" equal screen time – the film presents them as a match. Several examples of Krasner's encounters with the media are now analyzed to understand this connection, ordered chronologically in the film.

First, Krasner quite literally discovers Pollock. The "standard discovery narrative"[206] is essential in the world of media and Celebrity: the act of the unknown being discovered by the established, launching them into that Celebrity. In 2009 Usher famously discovered Justin Bieber, proving that who finds an artist is just as important as who is being found. For the first months of his career the young musician was nearly exclusively referred to in relation to his newfound mentor, and it seems every news outlet from the journalistically-oriented ABC[207] to the fashion-based Vogue[208] to the musically-inclined Billboard[209] thought it important to include the buzzword "discovered" in their story's coverage. Although the two musicians are no longer linked, Usher will always have claim on the fact that he first brought Bieber to fame. When Krasner enters Pollock's studio, not only does she first acquaint herself with him and his works, but she discovers him in the other sense: she triggers a set of actions that will launch him to Celebrity. Despite that he clearly has had some sense of career before her, in that the only reason she visits him is because they are in a show together, from this point forward all of Pollock's success can be attributed to Krasner in some way. She introduces him to dealers, manages his sales, and takes on ownership responsibilities in the vein of "finders, keepers."

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[206] Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (London: University of California Press, 1994), 161.
[207] Desiree Adib, "Rising Star Bieber Discovered on YouTube," ABC News, November 15, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Weekend/teen-pop-star-justin-bieber-discovered-youtube/story?id=9068403.
[208] Jessie Heyman, "Justin Bieber: 5 Things You Didn't Know About the Singer," Vogue, March 26, 2016, https://www.vogue.com/article/justin-bieber-5-things-you-didnt-know.
[209] Gail Mitchell, "Usher Introduces Teen Singer Justin Bieber, " billboard, April 28, 2009, https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/268791/usher-introduces-teen-singer-justin-bieber.

This is next shown with Howard Putzel's arrival in *Pollock*. While Pollock lays incapacitated in bed, Krasner runs into Putzel on the street and, upon learning of his connection to Guggenheim, immediately recognizes the importance in introducing the two men. She tries to establish a sense of order in the small apartment – a smile plastered on her face as she closes the door on Pollock and his antics – but the artist cannot be contained, rudely ignoring Putzel in favor of reminiscing with his accompanying friend. She understands that appearances are everything, a lesson taught by the media. While Putzel will ultimately either be impressed or unimpressed by Pollock's work, not his attitude, Krasner knows that words can go a long way in convincing someone. Most artists careers are, in effect, reliant on the public buying into a critic's review, or a collector trusting a dealer's intuition. As Howard Rutkowski, employee of Sotheby's and Bonhams auction houses, once said, "Never underestimate how insecure buyers are about contemporary art, and how much they always need reassurance."[210] Krasner provides that reassurance regarding the artistically and emotionally risky Pollock. This is next seen in the film's introduction to Peggy Guggenheim.

Arriving at Guggenheim's gallery, Krasner leads her partner through a small gathering of people, stopping to greet a couple before ushering the artist on – "c'mon Jackson!" She is the one to approach Guggenheim, advocating for Pollock's work despite that his invitation was not extended to impress the collector, but instead to be impressed by her and her collection. In a later scene when Guggenheim visits the artist's apartment it is Krasner once again who does all the talking, Pollock standing mutely in the background. In the gallery scene Krasner shows how involved she is in the art world, recognizing names and faces with far more ease than Pollock.

[210] Don Thompson, *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 9.

Krasner maintains herself in a social circle – she "controls and exploits this world"[211] to get from it what Jackson needs. Through her control she shapes his career, just as the media uses its control to do the same. It is hard to see her actions as anything other than selfless since the film depicts her sacrificing her career to bolster that of Pollock's. She does what is best for him: she builds up excitement around his name. But when the media does the same it seems sinister, since Pollock reacts poorly to his newfound fame. Krasner's actions come from a more personal place, but are not that different from the media's.

Krasner's control over Pollock's career becomes glaringly overt surrounding his *Life* article. The couple is engaged in a quiet domestic activity when the phone rings. Krasner asks "Are you here?" to which Pollock responds "That depends." If it has not already been made clear, this moment solidifies Krasner's dual role as wife and manager. She picks up, telling *Life* Magazine on the other end that Pollock is not available as he is painting in his studio. She takes a message for him, acting as secretary. Whether or not this actually happened is debatable, but in the film this moment shows Krasner's ability to make choices for Pollock; it is her discretion as to whether or not he should speak with the caller. Once Seiberling and Holmes arrive at their house, representing the magazine, Krasner literally speaks for Pollock, amending his answers to match a preconceived idea of who the artist should be and how he should be portrayed. After Pollock gives an inadequate answer as to who his favorite painters are (de Kooning and Kandinsky), Krasner steps in to name more refined, traditional painters (El Greco, Goya, and Rembrandt), trying to polish his image. The most important contribution she makes to Pollock's *Life* article, however, is the moment she creates his brand.

[211] Codell, 126.

At the end of the interview the ensemble moves into Pollock's barn-studio, where the artist poses against his painting *Number Nine*. This iconic arrangement will eventually be immortalized in *Life*. The viewer is given the privilege of watching the photograph come to be, and Krasner is the one to make it happen. She holds a jacket open for him, which he puts on. As she buttons it she admonishes him saying "there, that's better," implying it was she who had the idea for him to don the jacket. He plucks the cigarette from her lips, holding it between his own, and Krasner exits frame with the parting words "just be yourself," gently coaching him. By offering the artist a paint-splattered jacket and cigarette, labelling them as both "better" and "[himself,]" Krasner verifies this image, the one for which he will always be known. An image "in which old artist's myths – of the bohemian and genius who suffers from society – are connected with American national myths – of the cowboy and rebel."[212] Here is a man successful enough to be featured in *Life*, with an eighteen-foot-long painting behind him, yet he wears an old shirt and sour expression. In this scene, *Pollock* makes the claim that without Krasner, Pollock's public identity would never have been created. While Seiberling and Holmes stand back, Krasner assumes the responsibilities of the media in choosing how to commodify the artist. Her chosen brand, a "rougher, more brutal… less conservative"[213] American hero but with "more than a dash of the innocence of the Noble Savage,"[214] would be one that lasted.

Finally, the most unique, and uniquely cinematic, use of the Krasner/media match is a strange, short scene in two parts. The initial is inserted between Pollock's first Parsons show and his interview with William Wright (throughout which Krasner silently sits in the background, out-of-focus). A medium-close shot shows Krasner sitting outside in a wicker chair, upon which

[212] Berger, 33.
[213] Clement Greenberg, "Jean Dubuffet Und Jackson Pollock" 164, no. 5 (February 1, 1947): 138–39.
[214] Landau, 30.

is perched a crow. She waves a cigarette as she gesticulates, announcing “Pollock showed thirty pictures last fall and sold all but five— and his collectors are nibbling at those!” The scene cuts to the artist’s interview, which itself is intercut with shots of Pollock at work. Finally, the second half of the scene returns, where Krasner continues her grandiose speech, rhetorically asking “Did you see the Magazine of Art review? It was a public recant, a complete switcheroo. Five years ago, he called Pollock's work ‘baked macaroni.’ Now he says, ‘an impregnable language of image – beautiful and subtle patterns of pure form.’” Krasner does not look down as she says this, having memorized or paraphrased the critic’s words. In fact, her eyes wander in both shots, implying the presence of a small audience. To whom is she speaking? There is no piece of evidence in *Pollock* that could answer that question – at no point is Krasner ever shown in this costume or chair again, nor is she ever seen hosting a group of people outside. While arguments could be made for the neighbors, friends, or family, the film presents a more likely, though odd, option: Krasner is speaking to the second-person, having become herself the mouthpiece for the media.

Pollock has proven time and again that it is aware of both the media’s role and Krasner’s role in building the artist’s image. Therefore, there is no reason not to believe it is also aware of the connection between these two entities. In purposefully removing Krasner’s sightline and audience, *Pollock* draws the audience in more directly – not only are they watching Krasner on film, but they are sitting there in her yard with no mediator between them. The barrier of *Pollock*-as-media has been eliminated, and Krasner’s cigarette prop, rather than “Magazine of Art” prop, for example, similarly eliminates the barrier of review-as-media. The audience is left with nothing but Krasner herself to convey the constructed image of her husband.

The very last example of Krasner's transformation into the media comes after the film's dramatic five-year gap. The couple has lost all love for each other and quickly delves into an intense argument after Pollock comes home drunk and interrupts a calm conversation with Krasner's invited guests (Greenberg and Helen Frankenthaler, to be exact). The argument is entirely personal, with Pollock shouting such aggressive words as "I never loved you! Go fuck yourself! I don't even wanna touch you, whore!" and Krasner returning with "Your sex life is of no concern to me… and whatever trash you pick up at the Cedar afterwards, I could care less!" Their argument is clearly over personal and literal affairs, yet when Pollock demeaningly asks why Krasner is bothering him, she responds with an answer that has no relation to their private life: "You're Jackson Pollock and you don't paint! It's a tragedy and I can't stand it! Paint!" Here, she admits the reason she no longer can 'stand' him is because he has wasted his great talent, not because he is cheating on her, about which she claims not to care. It becomes evident that by this moment, Krasner has fully lost her role as wife and has fully embodied the role of media. Her priority is seeing Pollock paint, which she demands of him. She even evokes tragedy, using the melodramatic, trope-inducing language of the critics who have appeared throughout the film. Designating Krasner with this transformation emphasizes *Pollock*'s stance against the media: it represents it as an entity which exploits the personal life of the artist to impersonally and dishonestly advocate for an ideal it ultimately does not understand.

Krasner has become so out of touch with her husband that she reduces him to nothing more than his brand, which she herself helped create. In building up his Celebrity, Pollock and Krasner both lose the painter's true identity. The film shows a similar fight scene earlier in which the artists lose their calm over Pollock's flirtations with another woman, but it shows its resolution as well in the couple embracing privately, Krasner softly repeating her husband's

name. Now, this argument can no longer be resolved, Krasner unable to make it personal. Pollock feels this distance, this "disorienting partial acceptance that cannot reasonably construed as dismissal, except by a deadly, unreasonable stretch of the imagination,"[215] a deadly imagination Pollock has. Krasner therefore becomes his killer: she allies with the media, embodying Barthes' idea of the fatal camera lens. Scene after scene of lavishly disseminated compliments, it is revealed that her utmost faith in Pollock has ruined him, for "If there is any journalism that harms an artist more than uniformed condemnation it is uninformed praise… If even the people who claim to appreciate what one is doing misunderstand one, it completes one's sense of isolation."[216] But interestingly, she is redeemed as his savior. All the members of the media could in fact be considered saviors of Pollock, in creating "a public place in the nation for [Pollock's art] and… re-inscribing [his] works with heroic values in order to erase the abjection of these work's [*sic*] production and make them hygienic for consumption in markets and museums."[217] In other words, without the validity of the critic, the wildness of Pollock's work would never have been accepted. But Krasner's deed goes farther: after she calls Pollock to tell him she is about to depart for Europe Pollock hangs up, admitting he "[owes] the woman something. Without her [he'd] be dead." As if on cue, Krasner leaves, and Pollock dies. In this moment he claims the only thing saving him is his wife. Therefore, although Krasner occupies the fatal position of the media, she retains her origins as Pollock's caretaker, exiting the film as savior, not killer.

[215] Schickel, 224.
[216] Ibid., 226.
[217] Codell, 126.

iv. The Tools of Torture

Moving past *Pollock*'s characters and examination of the media, it is important to look at the specific choices the film *as* media made in depicting the life of its protagonist artist. While clearly self-aware and knowledgeable on the effects of the public press and communications, *Pollock* ultimately is a piece of media itself, utilizing an artist's life to convey a message. Examining the film's general similarities and differences between the elements of media it depicts would lead to repetitive conclusions, but examining the film's unique elements, as chosen by Harris, is illuminating in understanding its relationship to both the art world and media world. One creative component – the score – and one structural component – the film's ending – will be analyzed to discover how *Pollock* relates to this world it seems to condemn. Additionally, the effect of the film's MPAA rating will be analyzed, and a final conclusion will be made as to *Pollock*'s significance in bolstering the artist's Celebrity.

The film's score, composed by Jeff Beal, is comprised of seventeen individual tracks, ranging from about one to four and a half minutes each, encompassing forty-four and a half minutes of the film's total one hundred twenty-two. The tracks are either fast-paced or slow-paced with none in between, bright or haunting but never indifferent. Most importantly, the score is only included when at least one of two things happen: Pollock's art is shown or heavily discussed, or something develops in his relationship with Lee Krasner. This means there is no scoring under depictions of the media or the art world unless it is accompanied by an image of an art work itself. There is no scoring under familial scenes, or those with Ruth Kligman. It also crucially equates the significance between Pollock's art and his romantic life. Overall, *Pollock* is as much about the artist's relationships as it is about his work, as demonstrated by the film's score.

Although there are some deviances, the score separates the art-related tracks from the Krasner-related tracks through their tempos. Generally, the tracks that play during moments of Pollock's productivity and creation are faster, brighter, and feature more jolting bursts of instrumentals. As epitomized in the film's opening track, "Alone in a Crowd," these works feature several different instruments, with the strings carrying the main melody and a healthy amount of percussion giving the work its rhythm. "Alone in the Crowd" is an aural representation of a Pollock drip painting: it is composed of a myriad of melodies and harmonies that ebb and flow to balance each other and make cadence from chaos. The score makes the audience feel excited watching Pollock paint – this is not a laborious or tortured process, but one of inspiration and immediacy. It upholds the stereotype of "Action Jackson" while simultaneously eliminates the stereotype of a brooding, moody artist.

The converse to these tracks are those featuring Krasner's theme. In fact, there is less of a "theme" in this category as the tracks are more diverse. What they have in common, despite their differences in instrumentals, rhythm, and melody, is that they are all imbued with a sense of melancholy. The paradigm of this category is "A Letter from Lee," the sole track in the score named for a character. This track is played as Krasner's voiceover reads her letter from Europe to the now-debased Pollock. Oddly, and for the only time in the film, a dolly zoom ("the Vertigo shot") is used in this moment, giving an incredible sense of drama and cinematic importance to the act of Pollock standing silently in a field. The use of a traditional film soundtrack here – traditional meaning comprised of a simple piano-and-string melody – combined with this distinct shot heightens the trope of Pollock's fall from grace. Suddenly this movie is reminiscent of every

other which capitalizes on the same "romantic monomyth in which the artist, misunderstood by the world, takes leave of the world,"[218] which Pollock will do in a few short scenes.

The joylessness of the love-related tracks like "A Letter from Lee" have another, unrelated effect: they encourage a viewer to empathize with Krasner, questioning the role of the protagonist in *Pollock*. While the artist is clearly the most important character, and while he certainly drives the film with his objectives, orienting the plotline around his actions and obstacles, he never fully sympathizes himself with the audience, which Krasner successfully does. Screenwriting professor Craig Batty defines a protagonist as completing three stages with the audience – "recognition," "alliance," and "allegiance." The latter "pertains to the moral evolution of characters undertaken by an audience. The closest to an overall sense of identification, this asks the audience to actively participate in the making of meaning,"[219] a definition ironically similar to those of Celebrity. Not only does the film ask an audience to identify with Krasner over Pollock, but in a sense it is Krasner's objectives, too, which drive the plot's narrative. This is because Pollock is so easily guided by her, and therefore her desires often become his actions. While ultimately Pollock remains the film's protagonist, the heart-wrenching sorrow of Beal's score emphasizes the sympathy an audience member has for Krasner and elevates her significance to a quasi-protagonist.

The film's ending must also be examined in understanding how *Pollock* contributes to the media's use of trope and the celebritization of its eponymous character. The last two minutes the film are uncompromising in horror and violence. It averts gore, a device which only operates as shock factor, and instead highly focuses on emotion. It shows Pollock's final ride, ending both

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[218] Schickel, 226.
[219] Craig Batty, *Movies That Move Us: Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist's Journey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7-8.

the character's life and the film in the same moment. Arriving at a bar, Edith Metzger sensibly exits the artist's car, wanting to find another way home. Pollock drunkenly shouts at her to get back in the vehicle, which Kligman also insists upon. For a moment the audience is allowed to forget how the story ends, hoping Metzger will stand her ground, but she hesitantly reenters the car, sealing her fate. Almost instantly Pollock takes off at high speed, and Metzger starts shrieking from the backseat. Kligman remains calm and steady at first, but her crumpling façade becomes difficult to watch. She yells at Metzger to "shut up," an uncomfortable thing to hear for the informed viewer knowing what happens next, but her desperation fully unveils the seriousness of the situation. Pollock completely ignores the women, and the sound fades to silence as his head rolls back. After a few seconds the sound returns via Metzger's heart-wrenching scream, and Pollock turns the wheel, sending the car into a tree. The film fades, replaced by text imparting the facts of Pollock and Metzger's deaths.

The film's stylized portrayal of Pollock's death ultimately takes advantage of the elements of trope in a similar way Pollock's contemporaries did. It solidifies Pollock as a martyr, dying for the art he no longer believed existed in this world and the people he lost because of it. No matter that he is verbally abusive and emotionally manipulative in this scene, no matter that someone else lost a life at his hands, because with him dies the last hope for genuine American art. At least, that is a sentiment *Pollock* gives forth. The severe discomfort the scene emanates already establishes the audience in a sensitive mindset, vehemently hoping to not witness tragedy and more susceptible to sympathize rather than demonize. The use of silence specifically has incredibly religious connotations, likening Pollock to a martyred saint. The First Book of Kings imparts that "God shall be revealed, not in a burst of apocalyptic thunder, but in a 'thin voice of

silence,'"[220] and ever since then artists have been using silence to achieve a similar effect. Perhaps due to its clear implications of death and mortality, silence has become a storytelling device used to imbue a sense of spirituality. In silence a viewer, or listener, can attune to their own voice and their own values, can hear the "unexpressed and inexpressible."[221] When *Pollock* goes silent, specifically at the moment the artist willingly takes his eyes off the road, the audience subliminally connects it to moments in past popular films like Jesus' death in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), or art films like the original *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) in which Maya Deren plays God. Modern audiences have the additional ability to connect it to the uber-relevant and ultra-religious *Silence* (2016).

Not only is silence included for a semi-spiritual purpose at the moment before impact, but it returns to end the film as well. Eye-witnesses, or rather ear-witnesses, have all described knowing something was wrong when they heard a never-ending blow of a car horn.[222] Harris would have known this as it is included in *To a Violent Grave*, the first Pollock-biography he ever read and his original inspiration for the film. But ending the film with this noise would make the moment of death messy. It would continue to discomfort the viewer, who instead receives silence in which to ponder the life and death of Pollock. Consider: "biopics participate in the posthumous re-inscription of hegemonic values on artists and on their work."[223] *Pollock* spends two hours oscillating between showing the artist as a violent drunk and showing him as a misunderstood outcast. America has already decided his fate: Pollock was a tragic hero, "'suicided' by contemporary American society."[224] Therefore, the film must, too, show Pollock

[220] Toby Kamps and Steve Seid, *Silence* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2012), 71.
[221] Ibid., 72.
[222] Potter, 14.
[223] Codell, 134.
[224] Landau, 20.

as a mere victim, not a perpetrator. In allowing him and his death silence, rather than the aggressive intrusion of a car horn, Pollock "is presented as close to a whole person as a film of this sort could do,"[225] with just enough of a "tortured soul"[226] to let the audience continue its celebrity-worship.

Overall, the film does more good to Pollock's image than harm. It successfully shows the negative effect the media had on the artist, yet its positive influence over the artist's prosperous career. Through its focus on what the media did *not* publish, like Namuth's direction in *Jackson Pollock 51,* the film demonstrates how what *was* published was a single-sided narrative meant to convey the artist as a primal, intuitive painter. This is not to say it is free from narrative pitfalls. It has its own "box of cliches [*sic*],"[227] falling into trope and stereotype at times, as discussed. But considering Pollock did in fact suffer from alcoholism, was in fact obsessed over his own image, "[monitoring] [his] reputations' [*sic*] rise and fall,"[228] and did in fact die in a car crash at the age of forty-four, potentially of his own will, it would be hard to make a film on Pollock without depicting at least one stereotype of the Tortured Artist. Most importantly, while the film shows the media using this trope to celebritize Pollock, it avoids doing the same. It paints the artist as weak, servant to his demons, but it also shows his strength in his domestic aggression, and his choice to cooperate with the media, a choice other artists like Mark Rothko rejected.

Reviews of the film suggest that this dichotomy was accepted, critics easily seeing where *Pollock* fell into the "formulaic construction of a television biography" but admiring its passion

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[225] James Curran, "More to Pollock than First Meets the Eye," *GP*, July 22, 2002, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=mlin_m_tufts&id=GALE%7CA89417053&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&ugroup=outside&authCount=1.
[226] Braden Phillips.
[227] Peter Travers, "Pollock," *Rolling Stone*, February 16, 2001, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/pollock-20010201.
[228] Codell, 126.

and performances nonetheless. One accurately notes the film "is aimed at educated adults."[229] This is one of the particular ways *Pollock* does indeed succumb to the trap of the Tortured Artist: the film is rated R. Inherent in this rating is the idea that Pollock and his life are mature subject matters. The amount of alcohol, sex, and swearing in the artist's life is apparently too much for non-adults to handle, and its limited accessibility echoes the accessibility of the Tortured Artist living on the fringes of life, each outcasts in their own ways. It also heightens the film to a Serious Drama, implying a focus on actor, and therefore character, over plot – or, artist over art.

[229] Peter Bradshaw, "Pollock," the Guardian, May 24, 2002, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/may/24/1.

Chapter III. Rothko: Life, Death, and Everything After

I'll give you all of me… so tell me you love me, even though you don't love me – The Weeknd

For every way Jackson Pollock was a victim of the media, Mark Rothko was a victim of his own paranoia, a trait which would define his Celebrity. The higher in demand he and his paintings were, the tighter he clutched onto them. Not caring for money in the way other Abstract Expressionists did, as money was "one of the things he feared most and could least cope with,"[230] he became "set in [an] unalterable opposition to the world of consumption, even when it seemed that what that world wanted most to consume was [his] work."[231] Rather than allow himself to be consumed, he denied the art world his paintings, hoarding them so that at his death hundreds of paintings were left unsold.[232] Painfully self-aware of his role as a [blue]chip in the art world and its dealings, Rothko's story is one of a man whose deep and true love for his art gave him no choice but to end his life.

Like every Abstract Expressionist (with the exception of Pollock), Rothko had a difficult time selling his works even as his fame increased. By the late 50s, "Rothko's works had appeared in Venezuela, most of Europe, and would be seen the following year in India. But world-wide recognition failed to line the artist's pockets."[233] Though even at the time his shows were recognized as art-historically significant, renowned art critic Thomas B. Hess noting the "international importance of Rothko as a leader of postwar modern art,"[234] for example, his

[230] Hughes, 132.
[231] Schickel, 222.
[232] Strauss, 207.
[233] Lee Seldes, *The Legacy of Mark Rothko* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 35.
[234] Ibid., 34.

shows were "not a commercial success."[235] Despite this, "Rothko's prices went up,"[236] outwardly demonstrating his value without allowing the artist to reap any benefits of his worth. This inability to sell, in conjunction with his possessive nature, ensured Rothko was always struggling. But his struggle was partly self-imposed, reopening questions about the existence of the Tortured Artist.

"In his struggle to protect his works, Rothko was engaging a complex web of issues for modern painters who, unlike poets or composers, invest themselves in unique physical objects which are intended to be sold and therefore lost,"[237] which suggests that had his talent not been so immense, Rothko would have been in the wrong field. Inherent in his career was the stipulation he must part with his creations, an act which gave him great pain. This implies that whereas Pollock was assigned the Tortured Artist trope based on relatively little fact, Rothko truly embodied its qualities and actively participated in its fulfillment. The very thing which gave him passion was the same which caused him anxiety. Additionally, in "anthropomorphizing his works, Rothko closely identified with them, blurring the boundaries between the artist and his creation."[238] This, too, was a myth placed upon Pollock – that art and artist are one and the same. And once again, Rothko took that upon himself, accepting a trope he may or may not have been aware of. As Schickel says, "if modern painting offers a paradigm of how the relationship between art and culture proceeds in our time, then Mark Rothko's life is the paradigm's paradigm:"[239] the ultimate Tortured Artist.

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[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid.
[237] James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 305.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Schickel, 225.

As his fame grew and his income stagnated, Rothko's home life worsened. Perhaps this was due to money – his daughter would later share an anecdote that even in her adult years it was a treat to eat out at McDonald's.[240] Clearly life could not have been easy for the family of four. But this does not directly explain Rothko's increasing relationship troubles, as by many accounts "he was a great, loyal, wonderfully affectionate friend"[241] and "his affection for Mell, his wife, and Katie, their daughter, was touchingly obvious."[242] The more likely explanation was the artist's mental health struggles were affecting his home life, struggles which intensified each time Rothko came into conflict with the art world, which always seemed to question his values. For example, a 1950 *Vogue* article featured the artist's "Number 8, 1949," a clear sign of Rothko's popularity, but it advocated for the painting's use as interior design,[243] perhaps the most offensive interpretation of the work in the artist's eyes. Rothko could feel his authenticity fading away, replaced by the Celebrity he had accidentally accrued.

But no matter what, critics loved his work. Whereas no artist achieved fame as fast as Pollock, perhaps no artist has been as universally-praised as Rothko – "about no artist was there, in that time, such unanimity of critical opinion."[244] On the surface it seemed perfect: Rothko was making the exact work he wanted to be making, and it was work that others were genuinely moved by, work whose explanations people accepted and respected. But Rothko was unable to see any good in this. Perhaps he felt like a "phony" just as Pollock did, but regardless of the specifics, he truly believed his "consumers" were not understanding his works the way he wanted them to. By the 1960s "Rothko [was] well-known… but he was not, he felt, well-

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[240] Patricia Burstein and Harriet Shapiro, "The Rothko Case: A Suicide, $32 Million in Paintings and An Angry Daughter," People, December 12, 1977, http://people.com/archive/the-rothko-case-a-suicide-32-million-in-paintings-and-an-angry-daughter-vol-8-no-24/.
[241] Grace Glueck, "Mark Rothko, Artist, A Suicide Here at 66," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1970, 1.
[242] John Fischer, "Mark Rothko: Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1970, 16.
[243] Breslin, 303.
[244] Schickel, 225.

understood."[245] "Partly it had to do with the art world. He felt that the scene was being occupied by people who were influenced by him... and yet he felt rejected at the same time,"[246] all-too-aware of the facility with which art trends passed. And he wanted to be more than a trend – "it was the 'tragic and timeless' that he was after,"[247] not a fad in a fashion magazine.

In a way, Rothko's fame prevented this timelessness from ever being achieved. He was too iconic, too singular, too "familiar, recognizable, already known."[248] The community of the Abstract Expressionists, once a group of poor men raised in the Great Depression, "began to seem less possible and began to fragment into a collection of Olympian individuals" who had "become essentially a matter of the past rather than of the present."[249] Thus granted acceptance in the art world but denied the value which he really wanted, Rothko's mental and physical health deteriorated. He gained extreme weight and would suffer an aneurysm a year before he died.[250] "Because he could not resolve the contradiction he felt between the exalted aims of his painting and his material success, Rothko exaggerated his own sense of outsidership,"[251] even eventually separating himself from his family, living in his studio during the last year of his life. It would be in his studio that he would be found dead, in a manner unlike what those who knew him would have suspected.

Rothko's suicide itself was not out of character – he once told his assistant "If I choose to commit suicide everyone will be sure of it. There will be no doubts about that."[252] He was

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[245] Breslin, 414.
[246] Glueck, 1.
[247] Schickel, 225.
[248] Breslin, 414.
[249] Barry Schwabsky, *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.
[250] Strauss, 200.
[251] Hughes, 132.
[252] Ibid., 198.

obsessively and "self-sacrificingly devoted to his calling,"[253] and "tended to detect slights and veiled insults at every turn."[254] His mistrust of those around him led to pent up anger, which a friend described as the "justified anger of a man who felt destined to paint temples, only to find his canvases treated as trade goods."[255] Additionally, he was part of the demographic "who fell into the highest suicide category – divorced,[256] past sixty, alone… ill," and a white man.[257] But some thought the manner in which he killed himself was odd – for someone with a queasiness toward blood and incredibly poor eyesight,[258] the method of slashing his elbows after removing his glasses created a short-lived conspiracy-theory toward murder.[259] Nevertheless, whatever the reasons, whatever the facts, Mark Rothko had died, leaving behind hundreds of unsold paintings and a very contentious will.

Rothko's funeral was flashy: "The modern Medicis were there in force – the art patrons and investors who can afford to commission, collect, and donate art,"[260] not to mention the general "who's who of Manhattan's art world:"[261] Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, Helen Frankenthaler, and Barnett Newman, just to name a few of the more popular artists. Lee Seldes, the reporter who covered the trial from funeral to verdict, claimed that "except for the swollen eyelids and soggy handkerchiefs, [the funeral] could have passed for an important opening at an art gallery. The scattered minks and sables, tailored dark suits, fur collars and muffs stood out against the waning February sunlight... One onlooker even had the indelicacy to write to a friend that the Rothko funeral was 'the best vernissage of the

[253] Schickel, 223.
[254] Banville.
[255] Fischer, 23.
[256] By most accounts Rothko had not actually divorced his wife, but separated from her.
[257] Strauss, 201.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid., 202.
[260] Seldes, 5.
[261] Strauss, 197.

season.'"[262] This replacement of emotion for materialism had marked every step in Rothko's career and was an omen of a drama yet to come.

Within a few years that contentious will would prove to be unfathomably important in shaping the art world and Rothko's legacy. While its specifics are not directly relevant to Rothko's Celebrity and his presence in the media, it is important to understand its basic facts. Three men committed technically legal but morally shady acts, quickly and quietly selling the paintings Rothko left behind for a massive profit. Rothko's daughter, nineteen at the time and absent from the will,[263] then sued the men hoping to bring justice to her father's work. "The case eventually became a legal snarl,"[264] and would be splashed across headlines as the "Watergate of the Art World"[265] "in all its initial secrecy, mazy wanderings, and unpleasant moral implications."[266] More than that, though, the case acted as a Hollywood courtroom drama, or as "a Victorian melodrama of the fruitiest sort, and its characters could not convincingly be duplicated in modern fiction."[267] In fact, Seldes' book, an accumulation of her eyewitness-accounts, quite literally opens with a "Cast of Characters,"[268] demonstrating the clear similarities between the events and a play, and Robert Hughes described these characters as tropes, noting "two Wronged Orphans... a trio of Wicked Trustees, the ghost of a Great Artist, a Good Judge... [and] the Foreign Plutocrat."[269] If Rothko's life seemed marked by trope earlier, his death certainly did as well.

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[262] Seldes, 7.
[263] Burstein and Shapiro.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Strauss, 207.
[266] Hughes, 127.
[267] Ibid., 126.
[268] Seldes, xi.
[269] Hughes, 126.

The trial was a fight for Rothko's estate, more valuable postmortem than at any other time. "The market does not think the only good artist is a dead artist; but it knows that the best sort of artist is a dead good artist,"[270] and there were millions of dollars at stake. After a long fight which "rocked the art world"[271] the Good Guys won, leaving Kate and her brother Christopher financially stable for the rest of their lives, and as executors of the estate.[272] The trial demonstrated just how much money was circulating the art world, bringing a small sector of the New York market to the public's attention. It also ensured "artists are unlikely to be as naive in the future"[273] about the business of art. And lastly, it once again reshaped Rothko's legacy. A fight of this size guaranteed his significance in Art History, and his identity would be transmuted into abstraction. Not only did he represent the Tortured Artist, but he now represented vague concepts such as Justice and Morality. Even long after his death critics would remain certain of his works' unequivocal power. He was immune to dislike, and "the frame of language around Rothko saved his work from" acknowledgment he was "still prone to repetition and quite able to succumb to his own formulas and reflexive clichés."[274] As Hughes describes that language, "sublime, sublime, sublime, sublime: the reflexes go clickety-clack."[275] Rothko is lucky his work is so well-loved, but perhaps he would have appreciated if the media was more discerning. For this universal adoration reduces Rothko to a shallow identity, or a trope. One does not need to think hard to describe his works, already knowing what one is "supposed" to say. His Celebrity is secure, but it is one-sided, a shadow of what it could be if only he were loved just a little bit less.

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[270] Ibid., 127.
[271] Seldes, 1.
[272] Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *Artists' Estates: Reputations in Trust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 303.
[273] Burstein and Shapiro.
[274] Hughes, 133.
[275] Ibid., 136.

Chapter IV. Red

My heart is like a stallion: they love it more when it's broken – Fall Out Boy

i. Background

As the story goes, one day while working in London for the then-new Tim Burton movie *Sweeney Todd* screenwriter John Logan wandered into the Tate Modern.[276] He happened across the room where Mark Rothko's Seagram Murals were displayed, was hit with the power of the paintings (which he and his Rothko would both describe as heart-stopping[277]), and "knew instantly it was a play."[278] This play original production would go on to star acting legends Alfred Molina, Eddie Redmayne, and Jonathan Groff. It would win six Tony Awards: Best Direction, Best Featured Actor, Best Scenic Design, Best Lighting Design, Best Sound Design, and the coveted Best Play.[279] It would become a theatre-favorite, its monologues used in auditions for every aspiring young male actor. And all because a writer, with no knowledge of art or Abstract Expressionism or Rothko himself, read some very compelling wall text next to some very compelling artworks and thought he would write a very compelling play.[280] It is almost poetic: Logan mirrors the uncivilized, uneducated, aspirational Ken whose purpose in *Red* is to counter a Rothko threatened by in the insurgence of undeserving artists appropriating a canon they do not respect.

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[276] *Tony-winner John Logan on the Inspiration for "Red,"* (2011; Playbill Video), YouTube.
[277] Lauren Weinberg, "Mark Rothko is the Subject of Red at the Goodman Theatre," *TimeOut*, September 20, 2011, https://www.timeout.com/chicago/art/mark-rothko-is-the-subject-of-red-at-the-goodman-theatre.
[278] John Logan, interview by Amanda Morris, *John Logan: Interview*, TriQuarterly, October 31, 2011.
[279] "Red," IBDB: Internet Broadway Database, accessed February 26, 2018. https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/red-486438/#awards.
[280] Edward Gero, "RED: A Visit from John Logan, playwright, to Rehearsal," *The Making of RED* (blog), September 21, 2011 (4:53 p.m.), https://geroasrothko.wordpress.com/2011/09/21/red-a-visit-from-john-logan-playwright-to-rehearsal/.

Red explores the two years Rothko painted the set of works come to be known as the Seagram Murals. The play starts with the arrival of Ken, a fictional assistant eager to make the most of his valuable time with the famous painter. Over the play's five scenes and two years, Ken's confidence grows, Rothko's wavers, and Abstract Expressionism loses favor to Pop Art. Rothko experiences an artistic undoing as his opinions and ethics are challenged. The play is heavily rooted in facts; because Logan's inspiration developed directly from the wall text accompanying the paintings, research played a prominent role in his writing process. Logan has admitted that he came into the process as an artistic outsider, starting his work knowing "very little about Rothko or abstract expressionism or even art."[281] But he paid his dues, spending "a year researching Rothko as well as his peers and predecessors."[282] What resulted is a 90 minute exposé of the process of an established artist, littered with real quotes and full of artist name-drops.

Not only is the story of Rothko and his contemporaries more-or-less factually shown, but even that of Ken is rooted in historical accuracy. "Ken is a fictional character, created to dramatize Rothko's anxiety about competing with younger artists,"[283] but his life-story comes from that of Dan Rice, a contemporary of Rothko. Although in the play Ken is an amateur artist, inferior to Rothko and delegated to the demeaning job of assistant, Rice was in fact an artist of the Abstract Expressionism movement in his own right.[284] He was friends with Rothko and his contemporaries and assisted them at times to bring in an extra salary. One of these times was in the late 1950s, which became the basis for *Red*. In the play Ken was raised in foster homes

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[281] Christopher Wallenberg, "Rothko's paintings colored dramatist's 'Red,' *The Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Jan. 8, 2012.
[282] Weinberg
[283] Ibid.
[284] Anne M. Hamilton, "Dan Rice Painted A Life Of Authentic Charm And Grace," *Hartford Courant,* April 6, 2003, accessed December 18, 2017, http://articles.courant.com/2003-04-06/features/0304060099_1_robert-motherwell-mark-rothko-daniel-s-rice.

alongside his younger sister after the murder of their parents at the age of seven. In reality, Rice was raised with various relatives alongside his older brother after the hospitalization of his mother and death of his father and sister.[285] Other aspects of his life were changed as well: Ken is from Iowa, Rice was from California. Ken is fresh out of art school when he works on the Seagram murals, whereas Rice had already exhibited in several New York galleries.[286] Logan incorporates Rice's Tragic Backstory but shows disinterest in his actual success, an indication of the playwright's incorporation of trope in the narrative altogether.

Dan Rice was influential to the play in another important aspect: his account of working alongside Rothko imitates the language of the play so closely it is evident Logan used it for inspiration. James Breslin condenses interviews with Rice in his famous Rothko biography. Consider the following excerpt:

> "Hired during the summer of 1958, Dan Rice had helped Rothko to renovate the studio. Then he built wooden stretchers and stretched canvas which Rothko had bought from a tent and awning shop. Rice also assisted Rothko in applying ground color… 'often he would work on a ladder and I would work underneath until I was dripping with this stuff.'"[287]

Then compare it to the following two quotes from *Red:*

> "You'll help me stretch the canvases and mix the paints and clean the brushes and build the stretchers and move the paintings and also help apply the ground color."[288]

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[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Breslin, 382.
[288] Logan, 11.

> "Ken crouches; he will do the lower half of the canvas. Rothko stands tall; he will do the upper half of the canvas… he moves very quickly — using strong, broad strokes he sweeps across the top of the canvas as quickly as possible — big, horizontal gestures — moving the same for the bottom half of the painting — Some of Rothko's paint drips and splashes down on Ken."[289]

When comparing these two texts, it is useful to keep in mind a rather crude quote from film director David Fincher – in his director's commentary for *House of Cards* he says "I get a lot of flak, people saying 'you're repeating a lot of the same angles from [The] Social Network and [The Girl with the] Dragon Tattoo, of people at computers.' And my response is: 'how the fuck else do you shoot somebody at a computer?'"[290] When describing the relationship between Rothko and Ken, Logan's vocabulary is inherently limited. Yet both Breslin and Logan include imagery of stretchers and stretched canvases and applying ground colors in the same breath. Both of them place Rothko above his assistant, letting paint "drip" down. Clearly, Logan was intentional in using as much fact as possible. Therefore, each use of fiction is all the more compelling.

ii. Reality and *Red*

In his review in *The New Yorker*, John Lahr makes a bold statement usually ignored in the play's production: Rothko's central conflict in *Red* might in fact based on a bended truth. The play depicts that "the Seagram Building… was still under construction when he accepted the rich

[289] Ibid., 26.
[290] David Fincher, *House of Cards: Season 1 with Bonus Commentary*, Streaming, 2013, Netflix.

commission."[291] Then toward the end of the play he visits the newly-opened Four Seasons Restaurant and realizes "anyone who eats that kind of food for that kind of money in that kind of joint will never look at a painting of [his]."[292] However, there are reports that Rothko was under the impression that the murals would be displayed in the lobby of the prestigious new building, and that it was only after he learned they would instead hang in the adjoining restaurant that he refused to deliver them.[293] Lahr makes the accurate observation that "nonetheless, it's a good story and a good hook on which Logan hangs his scintillating discourse about Rothko and modern art."[294] He fails to acknowledge the accounts of Rothko's "strictly malicious intentions" to "ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room.,"[295] and therefore an important fact: even Rothko's own story is a mix of fact and fiction, lending itself easily to a medium which would do the same.

Red is a medley of faithful history and creative hooks which best serve the story. After all, it is not a biography – it is a play meant to make a full house of theatre-goers feel a range of emotions. Luckily for Logan, Rothko comes with his own life of drama. This is demonstrated through the carefully constructed set of phrases the playwright used when interviewed during the era of *Red*'s Broadway run. He discusses his draw to Rothko in vague terms like:

> "I'm always drawn toward big characters and the exciting, theatrical idea.
>
> Complex, dark characters appeal to me."[296]

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[291] John Lahr, "Escape Artist," *The New Yorker*, April 5, 2010, accessed February 3, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/04/12/escape-artist.
[292] Logan, 41.
[293] Lahr.
[294] Ibid.
[295] Fischer, 16.
[296] Logan and Morris

> "I'm always drawn to characters that I think are linguistically interesting, that have an interesting way of expressing themselves orally..."[297]
>
> "Clearly there was some transition that happened, and as a playwright, all you look for is transitions in characters…"[298]
>
> "I always seek out those characters who simultaneously confuse me and vex me and challenge me and annoy me and inspire me… Rothko was one of those guys who fascinated me deeply."[299]

Logan would not have written this play had he not found something inherently dramatic in Rothko's story. But his play is nonetheless heightened, conscious of an audience's need for hyper-reality. This exaggeration is usually where the Tortured Artist comes into play. The stable aspects of an artist's personality are ignored in favor of their mania, depression, or manic-depression. It is simply more interesting to watch character suffer than to watch them live a normal life.

Looking broadly, very few details about Rothko's personal life are used in the play. His artistic process and his artistic philosophies are explored thoroughly, yet his friendships, family, and history are barely discussed. Most of his personal details shared are in context of his art – Rothko's young adult life is spoken of when he details his early years as a painter. His relationship with Jackson Pollock is considered only to the extent in which their contrasting lifestyles inform their contrasting art styles. At one point in the latter half of the play Ken challenges Rothko, asking "you ever once asked me to dinner? Maybe come to your house?"[300] This is the only explicit reference to Rothko even having a home or life outside of his studio. *Red*

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[297] Ibid.
[298] Weinberg.
[299] Wallenberg.
[300] Logan, 35.

only offers one true glimpse into Rothko's backstory, one moment where his personal life is not directly correlated to his art. This is the moment when Rothko delves into his troubled childhood.

> After Ken shares a story about his traumatic past, Rothko shares his own anecdote:
>
> "ROTHKO: When I was a kid in Russia, I saw the Cossacks cutting people up and tossing them into pits ... At least I think I remember that, maybe someone told me about it, or I'm just being dramatic, hard to say.
>
> KEN: How old were you when you came here?
>
> ROTHKO: Ten. We went to Portland, lived in the ghetto alongside all the other thinky, talky Jews. I was Marcus Rothkowitz then… My first dealer said he had too many Jewish painters on the books. So Marcus Rothkowitz[301] becomes Mark Rothko. Now nobody knows I'm a Jew!"[302]

In his biography, Breslin gives ample pages to Rothko's life in Russia. He writes a similar sentiment as Rothko's in the play: "The Cossacks took the Jews from the village to the woods and made them dig a large grave. Rothko said he pictured that square grave in the woods so vividly that he wasn't sure the massacre hadn't happened in his lifetime… in another version of this story Rothko himself witnessed the digging of the grave and the ensuing massacre."[303] Logan's use of this memory as the sole insight into Rothko's life outside of his work is incredibly significant in examining how *Red* uses and subverts the trope of the Tortured Artist.

The Tortured Artist trope is not exclusive to childhood trauma. Narratives using the stereotype can be constructed around the death of a loved one, a significant rejection, or another event not specified in time. But deep-seated, lifelong struggle is a particular favorite for

[301] His surname was in fact "Rothkovich."
[302] Ibid., 28.
[303] Breslin, 17.

exploitative writers. Christopher Zara begins his book *Tortured Artists* with an anecdote about Alfred Hitchcock: he was wrongfully and severely punished by his father as a six year old boy, which is why he was so able to masterfully direct films about wrongful punishment and crime.[304] Joey Goebel's fictional novel *Torture the Artist* is a self-aware story in which a man is hired to prevent a subject from achieving happiness so that the subject may flourish in his musical talents – and that subject is a young child.[305] In Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman* the protagonist is a celebrity writer whose best-selling crime stories are based on his childhood,[306] during which his parents tortured his younger brother nightly so the protagonist would grow in his creative ability to write horror stories. In a complicated timeline, the protagonist discovers a piece of writing the brother had authored, admitting "it was better than anything he himself had ever written."[307] This play puts the Tortured Artist trope in hierarchy: the bystander of childhood violence writes best-selling novels, surpassing those who lead normal lives, but the victim of childhood violence writes the best of all.

While any kind of suffering is accepted in constructing the trope, that which occurs in childhood is favored as the child's brain is not fully formed. This means that the talent they are developing is happening in conjunction with the emotional turmoil they are going through. Their identity is determined by their emotional and mental growth, and their art stems directly from their identity, meaning their art will forever be tied to their suffering. This also shows that the traits in an identity are valued more the longer they have existed: when Kanye West famously debuted a new sound on "808s and Heartbreak" after the death of his mother, he was a musician who turned negative emotions into positive art. But when Chester Bennington released album

[304] Christopher Zara, *Tortured Artists* (Avon: Adams Media, 2012), 8-9.
[305] Joey Goebel, *Torture the Artist: A Novel* (San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage Publishing, 2004).
[306] Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003).
[307] Ibid., 24.

after album with Linkin Park after a childhood filled with abuse and loneliness, he was something bigger than himself. He was the voice of a generation, the voice of every other abused and lonely soul. His work resonated more personally with his listeners because they knew it came from a place carved farther within than a single distressing moment in his life. His pain was his identity, whereas West's was a phase.

Therefore, it makes sense that when including a tragic anecdote for Rothko in *Red*, Logan uses one from his childhood. But from this a question emerges: is it necessary to include a tragic anecdote at all? In an interview about the play Logan said his "job is to justify a character... it's just to present them and explain them honestly, let them live to serve the play."[308] This means that the anecdote must in some way "serve the play" and help explain Rothko. There are two clear areas of the play to examine in determining this story's use: its specific context to see why this element of the Tortured Artist trope was necessary, and the language of the play as a whole to see how this element fits into the broader narrative.

Rothko shares this childhood memory after Ken shares his own. As mentioned, one of the facts of Dan Rice's life Logan used for Ken was the death of his family members at a young age. In reality it was his father and sister, in *Red* it is his father and mother. Ken monologues for the first time in the play, using haunting imagery to convey the trauma he went through. Immediately after sharing this story, he tells Rothko he paints pictures of the men who killed his parents, what he imagines them to look like.[309] As *Red* is a play about Rothko, very little about Ken's life or Ken's work is mentioned. In fact, this information Ken shares is the only intimation of what kind of art he makes. Therefore, Logan cements Ken into the Tortured Artist trope: his

[308] *Tonys 2010: "Red" Playwright John Logan*, YouTube, GoldDerby, 2010, Accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYhgsb4AVNI.
[309] Logan, 28.

art stems directly from his pain, a pain suffered in childhood that endures into adulthood. And because much of the play is a comparison between the two men, showing how alike they are even across generations, it then follows that Rothko needs to share a story of pain that can be assumed to influence his art as well. In this context, Logan's use of Rothko's troubled childhood to paint the portrait of a Tortured Artist is necessary only because Logan had already done the same for Ken, and because the thesis of the play lies in their similarities.

The other element of the play that needs to be examined to determine the necessity of Rothko's anecdote are the broader language patterns of the text. Logan is faithful to Rothko's character; his philosophies echo the artist's real words, and his preoccupations are similar. One of Rothko's more famous quotes is that his interests are "only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom,"[310] and the first principle for his "formula" for art is "There must be a clear preoccupation with death—intimations of mortality... Tragic art, romantic art, etc., deals with the knowledge of death."[311] Logan uses this ideology, this obsession with the tragic, liberally in his play. The words "tragedy" or "tragic" are used a total of thirteen times in the play. That is about one-third the amount of times the word "red" is used (forty-two) – a fairly large percentage. To be pedantic, the theme of tragedy is given an entire third of the importance as the theme for which the play is named. Therefore, Logan's use of the Tortured Artist trope is justified. This is not a play about the Seagram murals, or the artistic process in general. It is a play about how tragedy was infused into Rothko's work, and how that tragedy transformed those works. Conveying this concept through a recognizable trope like the Tortured Artist is an

[310] Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), 93-94.
[311] F. Zaletilo, "Statement About Art," Daugavpils Mark Rothko Art Centre, 2016, https://www.rothkocenter.com/en/about-rothko/statement-about-art.

effective writing strategy. It would almost be odd to hear the word "tragedy" so often in a 90-minute play yet not hear the tale of a tragedy from either man.

Delving into specifics, it is curious to note which lines in the play are actual quotes, rather than the pure creation of Logan's imagination. While all of Rothko's dialogue in *Red* is incredibly reminiscent of the artist's way of talking, some lines in particular have clear and singular sources. In many cases these borrowed words are used in their original contexts, in some they have taken on an entirely new meaning. Below is a sample collection of lines from the play with a matching quote from Rothko, in the order they appear in the show, to establish the extent to which Logan appropriated the artist's words.

> RED: "These pictures deserve compassion and they live or die in the eye of the sensitive viewer, they quicken only if the empathetic viewer will let them."[312]
>
> RED: "A picture lives by companionship. It dies by the same token. It's a risky act to send it out into the world."[313]
>
> ROTHKO: "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world."[314]

> RED: "You miss the tragedy. The point is always the tragedy."[315]
>
> ROTHKO: "I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom… And if you… are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!"[316]

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[312] Ibid., 9-10.
[313] Ibid., 17.
[314] Mark Rothko, "Ideas of Art" *The Tiger's Eye* 1, no. 2 (1947): 44.
[315] Logan, 22.
[316] Rodman, 93-94.

RED: “Silence is so accurate.”[317]

ROTHKO: “Silence is so accurate.”[318]

RED: “Your intention is immaterial… The art has to speak for itself, yes?”[319]

ROTHKO: “We do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defense. We consider them clear statements.”[320]

RED: “…And I hope to ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who eats there.”[321]

ROTHKO: “I hope to paint something that will ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room.”[322]

RED: “When I was your age, art was a lonely thing: no galleries, no collecting, no critics, no money. We didn’t have mentors. We didn’t have parents. We were alone. But it was a great time, because we had nothing to lose and a vision to gain.”[323]

ROTHKO: “When I was a younger man, art was a lonely thing. No galleries, no collectors, no critics, no money. Yet, it was a golden age, for we all had nothing to lose and a vision to gain.”[324]

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[317] Logan, 31.
[318] “Mark Rothko: Classic Paintings,” National Gallery of Art, Accessed March 31, 2018, https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko-introduction/mark-rothko-classic-paintings.html.
[319] Logan, 37.
[320] ((Gottlieb letter))
[321] Logan, 38.
[322] See Note #.
[323] Logan, 42.
[324] Jonathan Jones, “Tons of verbiage, activity and consumption,” The Guardian, September 23, 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2008/sep/23/rothko.artworld.

All of Rothko's quotes in their original context are about his paintings; none of them are about his life. It has already been shown that much of the play's dialogue in general is about Rothko's art rather than his life. Therefore, one of these quotes stands out for its deviation from this pattern.

The late 1940s saw three developments in Rothko's paintings: they would simplify into multiforms, they would be titled by number or color, and they would be presented without explanation.[325] Rothko refrained from talking about the specifics of his work, not wanting to interfere with the viewer's interpretation or experience of it. This is when he stated that "silence is so accurate."[326] In *Red*, however, this exact quote has an entirely different context, capping a heated argument between Rothko and Ken. While the argument is heavily explored in Section iii of this chapter, it needs to be analyzed here for its relationship with this quote.

Ken begins a debate by advocating for the honesty of other (Tortured) artists – van Gogh, Matisse, and Pollock, to be exact. He cannot relate to Rothko's darkening color palate, considering it a cliché of an aging artist. In advocating for the bright colors of the final works of the other three artists, he ultimately depreciates them to stereotypes, speaking of their identities as if he knew them while only discussing their deaths. Rothko fights back, challenging Ken and his limited perspective:

> "Grapple with them, yes. Argue with them, always. But don't think you *understand* them. Don't think you have *captured* them. *They are beyond you.*… Spend a *lifetime* with them and you might get a moment of insight into their pain ... Until then, allow them their grandeur in silence."

[325] "Mark Rothko: Classic Paintings"
[326] Ibid.

Then the kicker – "Silence is so accurate."[327] This quote has been taken out of context more than any other in *Red*; it has nothing to do with painting as the original quote so clearly did. It is not quite personal, but it reveals more about Rothko than it does about his works. Logan's modification of this quote's context is a significant example to understand how trope is used in this piece of media.

In its original context, the quote represents a defining ideology in Rothko's career. Much like his works, it is simple, vague, and definitive. Most importantly, it summarizes all of his opinions on art that "speaks for itself," speaks to universal human truths, and is timeless. The art he desires to make, as evident in some of the other listed quotes, is art that can be inherently understood by any viewer who gives it the proper attention, simply because the work itself is so wholly devoted to the core of the human experience. Silence is accurate because words would just be distraction. If the painting is already showing something, why would there be a need to describe it? A good work of art, in Rothko's opinion, can be experienced without explanation.

Logan's Rothko in *Red* then attributes this sentiment to the artists themselves, rather than their art. The "grandeur" belongs to the lives of van Gogh and the others, not the paintings. It is they that deserve silence because the depth of their emotions and suffering are beyond what Ken can comprehend. Postulation would not distract from their lives' meanings as it would with Rothko's artworks, but instead would *insult* their meanings. Words are *too* simple here to describe such complex creatures. Rothko's suggestion to spend a lifetime with these artists – compounded by his defensiveness over their pain – implies that he considers himself among them. He has suffered as they have and likewise deserves silence. In asking this of Ken, he rejects the Tortured Artist trope. Whereas words were unnecessary in explaining Rothko's

[327] Logan, 31.

paintings because the paintings were so immediate, Logan uses this quote to show that words are unnecessary in explaining these artists because they are *not* immediate: the artists are nuanced beyond the scope of language.

Nonetheless, while this sentiment in of itself rejects the Tortured Artist trope, its specific use of Rothko's quote embraces it. Logan has equated van Gogh, Matisse, and Pollock to a work of art, objectifying them in a way: the same quotation once used to describe art objects has been repurposed to describe the lives of these artists. They have become nouns, as Rothko says in the play. Logan's decision to take a quote of Rothko's, well-known to be about his break from artist's statements, and use it instead to have Rothko express an opinion on his fellow artists is odd. In doing so, Logan shows a disinterest in respecting the artist's intentionality, using his words for his own convenience, rather than their intended purpose.

The changes between the quotes and dialogue are less significant elsewhere, but still demonstrate what Logan found most important in writing this play. Take Rothko's Four Seasons quote, for example. When *Red*'s Rothko "[hopes] to ruin the appetite" of the Four Season's patrons, instead of hoping to "paint something" that will do the same, his character becomes a little more vindictive, a little more hurt. This action cannot be thrown away as an artistic experiment in how art affects appetite; it is undoubtedly a personal desire. It is the opinion of a Tortured Artist. Additionally, Logan's insertion of "mentors" and "parents" after Rothko's quotation that growing up he did not have "critics" or "money" showcases the importance of Rothko and Ken's relationship in the show, a nonexistent factor in the artist's real life.

iii. Misery's Company

As entrenched in Rothko's own life as *Red* is, it does not shy away from touching upon the lives of other artists as well. Most notably featured in the play is Jackson Pollock (his last name is used eighteen times in the text), followed by Matisse and van Gogh. Other (tortured) artists like Rembrandt, Turner, and Michelangelo are referenced frequently, but the details of their lives are left unexamined. Not only does Logan offer small histories into the lives of the first three painters, but of course, their own personal "tragedies" are discussed as well. As stated, Pollock is the most referenced of the three, and it therefore follows that his tragedy is examined in farther depth than those of the other two. However, due to his little stage time van Gogh is almost exclusively reduced to trope, whereas Pollock's story is given more substance. Matisse falls somewhere in the middle; he is more than pure stereotype, but less explored than Pollock. The incorporations of these painters are examined to determine the ways in which *Red* presents iterations of the Tortured Artist.

Van Gogh features the least prominently of the three auxiliary Tortured Artists, but is analyzed here because of the uniquely exploitative way he is included in the play. He is mentioned in the debate discussed in Section ii, the closest the play comes to acknowledging the tropes it uses and subverts. Ken belittles Rothko's obsession with the color black, claiming it a trite motif for the aging and dying.[328] He instead favors the bright colors of van Gogh and Matisse, who even on the brink of death remained the great colorists they were. Rothko fires back, highlighting Ken's hypocrisy in replacing one stereotype for another:

> "And you think *I'm* the romantic. Can't you do any better than that? Matisse the Dying Hero... and Jackson Pollock the Beautiful Doomed Youth... and van Gogh,

[328] Logan, 29.

> of course van Gogh, trotted out on all occasions, the ubiquitous symbol for everything, van Gogh the Misunderstood Martyr — You *insult* these men by reducing them to your own adolescent stereotypes."[329]

This is the extent to which van Gogh is mentioned in *Red*, and this presents a complicated issue: his entire life is reduced to nothing but the Tortured Artist in this play, upholding that trope and that image of him, yet at the same time the harm in "reducing" him to that singular image is brought forth and derided. If Ken builds van Gogh into the Tortured Artist only for Rothko to tear that down, what is Logan ultimately doing in incorporating van Gogh into *Red*? It is too simple to give him a pass, to let his self-acknowledgement of fault erase that fault. After all, Logan did not need to include these differing opinions at all; he could have left van Gogh out of the narrative entirely. Or, he could have made the image of van Gogh more well-rounded while still letting Rothko deliver these lines. Therefore, the cost of devaluing van Gogh to nothing but the Tortured Artist must come at some greater benefit to the play and its statement on trope.

At its core, the play is about Rothko's decline in the face of an incoming art movement, a specific take on the broader topic of generational differences. Rothko's art is important to the play's plot, but ultimately serves as a backdrop for its thematic message. Ken represents the younger generation, full of life and possibility, whereas Rothko slowly devolves into a has-been. Consequently, every line of dialogue and every plot point in *Red* exists to serve that primary theme. When Logan allows his characters this small debate on the Tortured Artist, he is not openly campaigning for either opinion. And the question of which character is on which side does not matter in the grand scope of the play. Rather, he includes van Gogh and his plight to further develop his characters' contrast, a tool to show their generational gap. If Rothko and

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[329] Ibid., 30-31.

Ken's differences were not central to *Red* van Gogh's life would not be relevant enough to its plot to be included. But his life aligns well with the main ideological differences between Rothko and Ken, which is why Logan writes him into the play, sparking debate as a Tortured Artist. Therefore, Logan does not make a judgment here on the trope itself, but uses it as a way to elevate his story.

Using Jackson Pollock, however, Logan is able to explore the trope further, taking advantage of the artist's real-life relationship with Rothko to include him in *Red* more. Ken enters the play considering Pollock his favorite painter,[330] but Rothko slowly disillusions him about the Abstract Expressionist. This does not happen through any discussion on his work – that remains unchanged in Ken's eyes – but by discussing his personality and mental instabilities. Artist takes center stage over art every time Pollock is mentioned, demonstrating a hierarchy of artistic importance – name over product. In fact, someone who has never seen "a Pollock" could leave a performance of *Red* still unclear as to what his signature style looked like, despite how often he is mentioned and the play's focus on his artistic differences from Rothko. But this person would be able to glean his paintings' worth from how reverently Ken holds him, and they would of course the get gritty details of Pollock's life. After all, it is the debauchery of a celebrity which engrosses the most.

Logan does not shy away from controversy, addressing the suicide-or-accident debate that has circled Pollock's death since it occurred. This topic is inadvertently brought up by Rothko during one of his and Ken's many discussions on tragedy. After briefly mentioning each other's "tragedy" (the black mantle in Matisse's "The Red Studio" and the white snow outside Ken's childhood window), Rothko offhandedly makes a comment about the world becoming too

[330] Ibid., 12.

"unendurable"[331] for Pollock, resulting in his suicide. The ensuing conversation covers Pollock's behaviors and habits, his philosophies on art, and his own misfortunes. Logan fits him into the Tortured Artist stereotype easily, focusing on Pollock's deeply-felt emotions. Rothko tells Ken about Pollock's "drinking and the talking and the fighting and the dancing and the staying up late," appealing to "everyone's romantic idea of what an artist ought to be."[332] Rothko acknowledges Pollock's tendencies toward stereotype – even going so far as to tell Ken that Pollock's entire faith rested in his art, and once he no longer believed in art he could no longer survive in this world.[333] This is the epitome of the Tortured Artist – a volatile, lost, emotional man who lives for art and art alone. But the most interesting aspect of Pollock's inclusion in *Red*, and of this conversation, is Rothko's acknowledgement of *why* Pollock lost his faith, why life became "unendurable:" the media.

Consider the following excerpt:

KEN: What was his tragedy?

ROTHKO: He became famous… He grew tired of his form. He grew tired of himself. He lost faith in his viewers…He no longer believed there were any real human beings out there to look at pictures.

KEN: How does that happen to a man? … I mean he's an artist, he's in *Life* magazine, he's young, he's famous, he has money —

ROTHKO: That's exactly it. Here's a schmuck from Wyoming who can paint. Suddenly he's a *commodity*.[334]

[331] Ibid., 23.
[332] Ibid., 24.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Ibid., 23-24.

Pollock's tragedy is that he became famous: his fame made him a commodity, turned his artwork trite and meaningless. What was once raw, real, and original became the mainstream for avant-garde collectors and consumers. When Pollock painted a unique work, Greenberg supposedly told him "to do ten of these – a crass, commercial suggestion"[335] which demonstrates the populace's vapid need. Pollock consequently lost faith in his art – the one thing keeping him alive. Although the media was crucial to his success, as mentioned in Chapter One, Rothko here agrees that it also led to his downfall. He knows Pollock was just "a schmuck" who had a skill – he was not the genius *Life* Magazine or anyone else made him out to be. The postwar media simplified Pollock and his body of work to a false idea the artist could not maintain.

Here Logan is able to achieve the self-referentiality he could not when writing about van Gogh. Whereas Rothko and Ken's argument on van Gogh acknowledges the harm in this simplification of an artist, it nonetheless perpetuates the tropes it attempts to reject in exclusively referring to van Gogh's Tortured traits. In this scene Rothko and Ken's conversation acknowledges a similar point, but now has something extra: Rothko shifts the blame to the media, showing that the stereotypes are more than just misunderstandings – they are *actively constructed* identities. *Life* Magazine's presentation of Pollock as the "romantic idea" of an artist with his "Bohemian" ways was a selective choosing of his traits that would most appeal to a mass audience. Conversely, Rothko's anecdote of Pollock's drinking and fighting comes from personal experience and is mediated by Rothko's love for him.[336] More importantly, it is not Rothko's singularly selective opinion of Pollock, as Ken's opinion on van Gogh's death is. He brings up Pollock's tragedy to directly respond to *other* people's ideas of him, rather than to display his own negative postulations on the artist.

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[335] Codell, 125.
[336] Ibid., 24.

Examining Rothko, Pollock, and van Gogh's inclusion in *Red* presents a very clear conclusion: the more "stagetime" the artist gets, the fuller his character is; the less he gets, the more he is reduced to trope. But there is more nuance as well. Plays are different from other pieces of media in that their authors speak through third-party characters; the words on the page exist somewhere between the playwright's mouth and the mouths of the actor that speaks them. Films lie a little closer to their creator and farther from their characters in that a film script is comprised of scene directions in addition to dialogue. But a play script is dialogue alone. Therefore, *Red* offers an engaging look at the intersection of a writer using trope, and a character using trope. Van Gogh's scene demonstrates the latter, and through it Logan is able to address the harm in the Tortured Artist stereotype. In clearly presenting it through Ken and shutting it down through Rothko he alerts his audience to the trope's existence, asking them to be smarter viewers. But the two differing opinions make it difficult to decipher what Logan agrees with and ultimately advocates. Pollock's big scene, however, aligns less with either character's personal ideology, thus presenting a clearer image of Logan's beliefs. In citing the media as a source of Pollock's tragedy (rather than giving Pollock a Tragic Backstory as he does Rothko and Ken), his dissatisfaction with the Tortured Artist trope is evident. In the scene he rejects elements of the stereotype as he does the Backstory, and instead demonstrates it as the narrative tool it is, rather than truth.

iv. Productions and Press

To further this point, analyzing *Red* comes with a unique challenge: what in fact is *Red*? A film is simple: the final product can be packaged into a film reel, a DVD, an mp4 file, or more. What the director premieres can be watched in its exact form by audiences generations to come,

give or take image and sound quality. This is not true for a play. There is an expectation of consistency from night to night during a play's initial run, although there is room for variation inherent in its live staging. But once a specific run closes, not only would it be incredibly difficult to recreate the director's production in a different theatre under a different budget, but doing so would be distasteful, unoriginal, and ultimately would not even be produced. Dramatists Play Service, the company that licenses performances of *Red*, specifically prohibits the use of recording devices during the play, eliminating any potential of a visual or aural canon. Therefore, *Red* is ultimately the script alone, and the script should be treated as the most important element in analyzing the play's use of trope and its process in celebrity.

Nonetheless, it would be remiss to ignore the staging, design, and acting choices various production teams of *Red* have made. By and large productions are similar, as changing any dialogue in the script is prohibited as well, constraining the story that can be told. Additionally, the script lends itself toward certain themes and motifs, and a good director would work with the themes given, making off-the-wall productions uncommon and unfunded. But a good director also knows that even within constraints there is a variety of ways to tell the same story, and ways to leave the audience with a different impression. Moving past the canon of the script, it is important to look at noteworthy productions of *Red* to analyze how other directors and designers characterize Rothko, and in which ways they choose to add to his Celebrity.

Because of the video prohibition regulation, information on play productions are most readily found in reviews and their accompanying images. Not only are these publications illustrative of the choices that went into specific productions, but they also demonstrate the opinions and perceptions of their reviewers – how they reacted to the choices made. They demonstrate whether or not the directing was effective, and in which ways artistic elements were

connected. Like Logan, these reviewers and their articles make up the media, and play a part in celebritizing Rothko through *Red.*

The one thing nearly every review of every production of *Red* has in common is high praise for a troubled and intense portrayal of Rothko. A New York Times review of the original Broadway run begins with the sentence "Even before you see his eyes, you're aware of the force of his gaze,"[337] referring to Alfred Molina's embodiment of the artist. On the other end of the theatrical and critical spectrum, as well as the country, Broadway World Arizona says of a local show "Michael Fleck delivers a roaring and riveting performance as Mark Rothko."[338] In reviews whose professionalism is everywhere in between the artist's depiction is described as "a terrific account of someone leading a life of noisy desperation,"[339] "fiercely ascetic,"[340] or oddly "always hectoring, always correcting, always combating the ghost of his eclipsing friend Jackson Pollock."[341] These reviews demonstrate that each performance of *Red* focuses on Rothko's brash personality. While Ken ranges from "a powerful, sophisticated, and nuanced… force to be reckoned with"[342] to a "somewhat shy" character with a "jumpy" transition,[343] Rothko is consistently directed to be overpowering and Tortured.

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[337] Ben Brantley, "Alfred Molina as Mark Rothko in John Logan's Drama," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/02/theater/reviews/02red.html.
[338] Herbert Paine, "BWW Review: Theatre Artists Studio Presents RED ~ Illuminating And Riveting!" BroadwayWorld.com, Accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.broadwayworld.com/phoenix/article/BWW-Review-Theatre-Artists-Studio-Presents-RED-Illuminating-And-Riveting-20180305.
[339] Jane Hardy, "Review: John Logan's Brilliant Rothko Play Red Acted with Humour and Intensity," *The Irish News*, April 12, 2017, http://www.irishnews.com/arts/2017/04/12/news/john-logan-s-brilliant-rothko-play-red-acted-with-humour-and-intensity-994800/.
[340] Jane Coyle, "Red review at Lyric Theatre, Belfast – 'explosive, stimulating, spectacular,'" *The Stage* (blog), April 12, 2017, https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/red-review-lyric-theatre-belfast/.
[341] Charles McNulty, "Theater Review: A Blazing 'Red' with Alfred Molina as Mark Rothko," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/14/entertainment/la-et-cm-0814-red-review-20120814.
[342] Paine.
[343] Anita Gates, "A Review of 'Red' in Hartford." *The New York Times*, April 13, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/nyregion/a-review-of-red-in-hartford.html.

At first is it unclear why this happens. Both roles have equal stagetime and have ample opportunity to be equally impactful. They both have lengthy monologues, scenes of sadness and scenes of joy (or at least, the closest to joy Rothko can achieve), and they even both get to paint on stage. The answer lies in the fundamental biographies of their characters: Ken is an unknown artist, fresh out of school, who rises to honor from his humble origins under Rothko's guidance, while Rothko is a well-known artist who falls from grace because of Ken's interruption in his life. This lethal combination of Celebrity and Torture is what leads to universally-impressed critics of Rothko's performance: not only do audiences automatically assume the more tragic role is the more powerful one, but Celebrity fosters Celebrity, and audiences *know* Rothko is the character they are "supposed" to be focusing on. As an underdog, and especially as a "kid," as Rothko calls him, Ken is the de facto supporting role. With age comes prestige, elevating Rothko to the leading role. Added to the fact that Rothko existed and that some theatre critics might already be familiar with his work, Rothko inevitably is given more attention both in the rehearsal room with the director, and in the play's reviews.

The language of *Red*'s various reviews suggests that each production places significance on a different theme. These range from paternal relationships, to the violence and toll of art-making, to artistic philosophy itself. To best understand the effects of these different focuses, two significant productions of *Red* will be examined through the reviews critiquing them. These are the original production, directed by Michael Grandage at the Donmar Warehouse in London and the Golden Theatre in New York, and the Chicago premiere, directed by Robert Falls at the Goodman Theatre. Falls' production was the second in the United States, so while Grandage's set the standard for all future productions of *Red*, Falls' set the standard of adaptation and

change. In addition to these two productions, several smaller shows will be discussed briefly to offer further examples of *Red*'s treatment on stage and in the press.

One major choice the original *Red* team made was characterizing Rothko as an aggressive, dominating, and desperate man. The New York Times review continues to describe the play's first moments, reporting that "Alfred Molina sits with his back to the audience... yet the set of his neck and shoulders makes it clear that he is staring hard and hungrily."[344] From this first impression it is clear Grandage and Molina found inspiration for the character in a description of him in the play: "the old lion still roaring."[345] The production focused on Rothko's anger – anger at Ken's incompetence, anger at the rise of the pop artists, anger at his own choice to sell the paintings, which deep down he knows is wrong. Another review says "he moves like a locomotive, and even when he is still you can feel the throttle pulsing."[346] This anger has the effect of making Rothko colder, and thus harder to relate. What follows is a script whose drama is not tempered by empathy, causing an interesting reaction that dominated the original production's reviews – many found Logan's script "corny,"[347] and a "lecture on aesthetics."[348]

Considering this reaction to Logan's script was not found in reviews of other productions (ironic, as their only inherent commonality *was* that script), it seems that there is a direct correlation between Rothko's relatability and the conviction of the characters' dialogue. The New York Times review continues to say that Logan "doesn't entirely avoid the expected conventions of fictional works about real (and usually anguished) artists, an often embarrassing

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[344] Brantley.
[345] Logan, 39.
[346] Tulis McCall, "RED," *New York Theater Guide* (blog), April 1, 2010, https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/red.
[347] Charles Spencer, "Red at the Donmar Warehouse, Review," *The Telegraph*, December 9, 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/6767740/Red-at-the-Donmar-Warehouse-review.html.
[348] Michael Billington, "Red | Theatre Review." the Guardian, December 9, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/dec/09/theatre-review-red-donmar-warehouse.

genre."[349] Perhaps playing the characters with steadfast seriousness highlights this element of the script. As already seen, the dialogue in *Red* does offer multiple perspectives on trope and cliché, so if the actors only play to one angle of Rothko, the Tortured angle, then audiences miss out on the nuance Logan included in his script. Rather than see Rothko as a complex human, they saw him as "an insufferable egotist."[350]

The Chicago production, on the other hand, characterized Rothko gentler. Although opinions were mixed on this choice, all agreed that Edward Gero's Rothko was a "vulnerable, placid, subtly intense artist that only hinted at the painter's infamous petulance, fiery temper and volatility."[351] He aligned more with the broken aspects of Rothko, the parts of him that drank too much and cared too much, to the point of maintaining a "hermetically sealed submarine"[352] in which he had little contact with the outside world. One review thought this interpretation was beneficial, claiming the play "escapes its declamatory structure on the strength of its performances."[353] The Chicago Tribune took a neutral stance, describing Gero as "quite different from Molina… If Molina's Rothko was a raging, terrifying, unstinting King Lear, Gero captures the old man in more reflective, agonized mode. It is, you might say a kinder, gentler Rothko than the original."[354] But others thought his sensitivity detracted from the story. A Chicago blogger claimed "Red could not exist without the dynamic performances of Alfred Molina and Tony-winner Eddie Redmayne,"[355] and thought "the Goodman production lacks a fiery internal life,

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[349] Brantley.
[350] Spencer.
[351] Tony Frankel, "Chicago Theater Review: RED (Goodman Theatre)," *Stage and Cinema* (blog), October 2, 2011, http://www.stageandcinema.com/2011/10/02/red-goodman/.
[352] Logan, 36.
[353] Kris Vire, "Red at Goodman Theatre | Theater Review," TimeOut, September 27, 2011, https://www.timeout.com/chicago/theater/red-at-goodman-theatre-theater-review.
[354] Chris Jones, "At the Goodman Theatre, a Taut Canvas Streaked with 'Red,'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 2011, http://www.chicagotribune.com/ct-ent-0928-red-goodman-review-20110927-column.html.
[355] Frankel.

largely due to Gero's interpretation."[356] Not only do these varying reviews demonstrate there is a range of ways to perform this play, but they demonstrate that viewers have mixed feelings toward a Tortured Artist.

While a bombastic Rothko might underscore the script's tropes, causing the performance to feel disingenuous, a vulnerable (or Tortured) Rothko is less inspired,[357] as one critic put it. Perhaps by this they mean, an argumentative character is more engaging to watch, since they face their scene partner with more vigor. It might be more Dramatic, part of an "all-too-familiar Broadway recipe for flattering middlebrows into feeling highbrow, allowing audience members to signal their sophistication with knowing laughs at intellectual references,"[358] and therefore a little more trite. But its canon in the history of theatre forgives that for the sake of entertaining performances. Conversely, a sympathetic artist might fit the script's tone more, but does not make as exciting theatre. Falls' "examination of the intellectualism, psychology, and struggle behind art lacked intensity and emotion,"[359] despite Rothko's more honest portrayal.

Another element that changes between productions, or at least between reviews, is the play's ultimate message, theme, or core. To paraphrase the words once stated by a Tufts University drama professor, *Hamlet* is about many things, which is what makes it a good play. A director needs to choose from the options which one thing their own *Hamlet* will be about – that is why it is able to be directed again and again without becoming boring. Likewise, *Red* has several themes, each of which might resonate with a different audience. In fact, the Chicago Tribune hypothesized that Gero's Rothko was so soft because the Midwest values kindness,[360]

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[356] Ibid.
[357] Frankel.
[358] Brantley.
[359] Frankel.
[360] Jones.

subliminally leading to a more "wounded performance,"[361] rather than wounding. Whether it be dependent on location or personal interest, varying reviews of *Red* demonstrate a diversity of focuses on the script's themes.

There is no overwhelming majority on the play's interpretation, although most reviewers determine *Red* to be "about" art in some capacity or another. Jane Hardy of Ireland makes one of the bolder claims, stating that "this play… is about nothing less than why we need art."[362] Michael Billington in London narrows this idea, saying that through it all, *Red* is "a totally convincing portrait of the artist as a working visionary."[363] Other reviews concentrate on Rothko as well, with New York's Ben Brantley sharing that "what we see, above all, is an artist seeing… a study in artist appreciation, a portrait of an angry and brilliant mind,"[364] and Anita Gates declares that the play is "clearly about an artist's passionate relationship with his work."[365] These reviews suggest a biographical approach to *Red*'s staging, with a focus on realism that emphasizes Rothko and his life. Some reviews, however, claim that the art itself is at the center of the play and its meaning. Tulis McCall, also of New York, says "Red is not about Rothko, it is about the paintings he left us."[366] Chicago's Kris Vire thinks the play is "little more than an overly precious defense of vulnerable art and artists from the vulgarity of critics and commerce," consisting of "primarily… doctrinal diatribes about art."[367] Perhaps these productions highlighted the intellectual conversations between Ken and Rothko, prioritizing those moments over details of the characters' personal lives.

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[361] Kevin Nance, "'Red' Directors Re-Create Rothko's Studio at Arena Stage," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2012, Accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/red-directors-re-create-rothkos-studio-at-arena-stage/2012/01/09/gIQALZDFuP_story.html?utm_term=.4082cc703ff3.
[362] Hardy.
[363] Billington.
[364] Brantley.
[365] Gates.
[366] McCall.
[367] Vire.

Still, many productions seemingly focused "more intensely on Rothko's evolving relationship with his new assistant,"[368] itself, with many reviewers particularly comparing it to that of a father and son. A Los Angeles review notices the play's questions on commercialism and commodity, but claims that "enfolded within this publicly important drama is a more private and emotionally resonant one involving two wounded men, who are simultaneously coveting and resisting a father-son relationship."[369] A Chicago review saw paternal significance in Ken's familial anecdote, asserting it as "reinforcing the father-son dynamics between Rothko and Ken, which climax in a psychic bloodletting akin to patricide."[370] Both of these critics found favor in Ken's performance, a role generally hit-or-miss across interpretations, exemplifying the positive effects of a production's equal focus on its two characters.

Finally, many reviews suggest that *Red* is simply a good vehicle through which to showcase theatrical talent. Herbert Paine's three reasons to see a Phoenix production of the play was "the acting"[371] three times. Joanne Ostrow borrowed Logan's own words for her Aurora review, calling the play a "'thinky, talky' piece… more character study and thinking exercise than plot-driven drama."[372] McCall raved about the finesse of British dialogue, and nearly every single review mentioned the exquisite craft of their production's set design. These suggest the work of directors who put less emphasis on the history and realities of *Red*, instead hoping to appease a primarily theatre-based audience, rather than an art-world-based one. Or perhaps it simply suggests these critics knew or cared less about Rothko and his works. Few, although

[368] Gates.
[369] McNulty.
[370] Nance.
[371] Paine.
[372] Joanne Ostrow, "Theater Review: 'Red,' a Character Study of Mark Rothko, Shines at Vintage Theatre," The Know, December 19, 2017, https://theknow.denverpost.com/2017/12/19/red-vintage-theatre-2017-review/170563/.

some, took note of the play's theme on "aging and the predatory instincts of the young,"[373] a theme to which much attention was given in the Tufts University production.

One final insight the many reviews of *Red* offer is their universal adoration of the scene in which the two actors actually paint. Considering props are rarely used like this in other plays on stage, regardless of professionality or budget, the scene is inherently exciting, almost breaking the fourth wall and an audience member's captivation as they wonder about the actors' qualifications to paint. Whether the show was adored or panned, most reviews mentioned this scene and thought it well-directed. Several reviews called it "sensual" or "erotic," and a few compared the splashing of paint to the splatter of blood.[374] No matter a critic's opinion on *Red*'s acting, writing, direction, or plot, it can be said that watching an artist create is a universal thrill. Although few of the actors who embody the two roles are likely painters themselves, watching them perform in this scene is quite literally like watching Rothko himself paint his expansive canvases. It unveils some of the mystery, or myth, of this artist whose life is shrouded in the stories others have made for him. Although no documentary film of Rothko painting exists, and therefore this scene is imagined in a way the dialogue-based scenes which borrow the artist's own quotes are not, it is the scene which seems most honest, bringing the viewer closest to the man in whose life they are investing a few hours of their night.

Ultimately, all of these reviews are suggestive of a single thread that weaves throughout the analysis of *Red*: Logan is aware of existing narrative tropes and offers multiple viewpoints in his play to avoid directly approving of or condemning the Tortured Artist. Logan had a unique opportunity to shape the legacy of one of America's best artists and chose instead to write a text just vague enough to renounce responsibility. There was no doubt his play was going to be

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[373] Jones.
[374] Spencer.

popular – "The Donmar Warehouse theater in London offered him a production before the play was even completed."[375] There would inevitably be large numbers in his audience that had little to no exposure to Rothko, learning about him through *Red*. Logan presents varying shades of Rothko's personality and works, from his most aggressive to his most vulnerable, from the paintings' preciousness to their structure as just pigment on a canvas. In doing so, he asks the audience to formulate their own opinions. They have the freedom to see Rothko as a Tortured Artist, and they have the freedom to see the limited scope of that perspective. Logan additionally gives responsibility to another party: the production team. This demonstrates that although Pollock was the action painter and Rothko the thinker, it is the physicalizing of his words that makes the greatest impact, not the words themselves. In a way, this is reminiscent of Rothko's own works; his philosophies were grand and widespread, but Ken's words ring true: "the art has to speak for itself."[376] It is what physically manifests that matters most.

[375] Gero.
[376] Logan, 37.

Chapter V. Directing *Red*

'Cause it's a very big, very fraught – simple, but it's not – it's a very big undertaking – The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Around the winter of 2015 I became interested in directing a play at Tufts. Extremely uneducated in theatre, I ran a few quick Google searches to try to find one that attracted me and would be manageable for a first-time-director. I had the idea to research recent Tony Award winners, as those plays could be counted on for quality, at least. I looked up every single winner and nominee, moving backward chronologically, until I finally reached the 2010 selection and a play called *Red.* Upon learning that *Red* was about Rothko I decided to acquire the script and read it. I did not know much about Rothko at the time, having only studied him briefly in my Advanced Placement Art History class in High School, but I liked art and I liked theatre and thought it could be a good fit.

I first knew I wanted (nay, *needed*) to direct *Red* when I arrived at page 19. This is the moment Ken and Rothko begin naming red objects and associations. I was hit with so many thoughts at once. First, an excitement at Logan's indulgence in his play's title and main theme (even on opening night I would get a flash of joy every time the word was uttered), and at Ken's boldness, a first in the play. But second, I realized how deeply *Red* is rooted in the canon of art history. While it barely scratches the surface in dialogue, I understand that everything I was reading and imagining staged in my head was entirely dependent on every single moment of art history happening exactly as it did. This play existed because Rothko chose a specific color palate, and that color palate was chosen because Matisse painted his studio, and Matisse painted his studio because Manet shattered tradition with *Olympia*, and Manet painted *Olympia* in direct

response to Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Thus, Rothko's Seagram Murals and Ken's conjuring of "Titian hair"[377] are linked not only by their color, but by a chain of events we call Art History.

What struck me the most, however, was that these two reactions came from two halves of me: the theatre nerd, and the Art History major. Not only did it appeal to my own interests, but this play had the power to appeal to a wide-reaching population. The "ruby slippers"[378] were for the film buffs, the "apples and tomatoes"[379] for the restless children in the audience, the "sports car"[380] for the economics major dragged to the play by their significant other, and the "flag in Delacroix"[381] was for me, who wrote about that painting in my Tufts application. It was the perfect play: a combination of scholarly research with an abundance of pop culture references.[382] It could educate while entertaining.

This was also the moment I knew I could not direct *Red* as my first play. It was far too deserving of a better director. I would not know how to design it or how to run a rehearsal with only two actors or how to handle its intense subject matter. I shelved it and eventually found another play I would go on to direct. But the following year I began to think about writing a Senior Honors Thesis. I was reading Andy Warhol's autobiography at the time, and thoughts of celebrity were swirling around my brain. I was particularly attracted to his tragic death (Alix Strauss was not lying when she said "the truth is, people want to know the gritty, dirty details"[383]) and began to grow more curious about Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, other artists of a similar moment whose lives were ended before natural causes could claim them. I

[377] Logan, 19.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid.
[381] Ibid.
[382] A description, I hope, for this thesis as well.
[383] Strauss, xxi.

remembered *Red,* and evidently decided to write on depictions of death and its relationship to Celebrity in different fictional narratives featuring the artists.

Jump ahead to Senior year and I was faced with the task of directing this play that had intimidated me so only two years prior. This time I was faced with a new fear. The conceit of my thesis was uncovering the harmful ways the media took advantage of Pollock and Rothko's tragedies, using the "drama of [their] death" as "fodder for tabloid exploitation"[384] in their own time and popular entertainment in today's. How could I then justify staging this play which, nuanced or not, *does* turn misfortune into recreation? Did I have the responsibility as a theatre director to create the most exciting piece possible, regardless of whatever details of which I took advantage? Or did I have the responsibility as an Art History major to present the characters as truthfully as possible, even if that meant downplaying the drama? These were questions I would continue to ask myself long through the rehearsal process.

"Director's Log #1 – December 20, 2017

…'Red' is already proving to draw in the SMFA crowd. A decent number of my designers are artists themselves, and are very knowledgeable on the subject matter."

I decided to produce the play through Pen, Paint, and Pretzels (3Ps), the student theatre organization, in order to get the most resources possible for this production. I was given a design team, most of whom I had never met, and began design meetings over winter break. It was an incredibly exciting process – working with a group of artists to portray the life of an artist past. A major decision I made was not to reproduce Rothko's paintings at any point in the show. This was a significant deviation from every other production that I had researched, although this

[384] Thaw.

would not be the last time our play differed from the others. I made this decision for a few reasons. Practically, it would cost less to use a suggestion of the paintings rather than the paintings themselves. Aesthetically, I liked the idea of using canvas frames in the blocking to add geometry to the set (an idea which later proved infeasible). But I had a distinct reason ideologically as well.

Despite whatever I may have hoped, I knew my audience would be predominantly "theatre people," not "art people." I had to make the play accessible in every way I could to show that Abstract Expressionism was exciting, not boring. Ultimately, to me *Red* is not about the works of art themselves. It is about Rothko, his process, his relationships, and his beliefs. I did what I had researched so many other forms of media doing: I focused on the artist over the art to form a more compelling, more coherent narrative for the general public. And thus the murals were cut from the play, never once appearing on stage.

My design team proved to be an invaluable source. Although I liked to think I knew all about art, the truth is that I knew all about art *history*, which I quickly learned was not the same. We discussed how to mix paints, how to build canvases, how long a painting would need to dry, and dozens of other practical questions I had never considered. Suddenly I found myself with a new appreciation for an artist I thought I appreciated enough. I understood why Rothko would be so protective over his works; if it took this much effort to make one, how could he possibly send it off without knowing if it would be properly cared for?

> *"…Several actors have told me Rothko is their "Dream Role," or that they've used one of his monologues in an audition. It's fun to watch how this real, once-living man has become a character like any other in a play."*

The next major step was casting *Red*. I knew I would have a reasonably-sized audition pool since the play is so popular in the theatre community. But I did not want to just cast *somebody*, I wanted to cast the perfect actors, actors who did their characters justice. Even by theatre-standards, set by those with an intimate knowledge of the craft and are thus harder to impress, Rothko is an incredibly challenging role. Getting cast in it is like signing a deal with Peggy Guggenheim or receiving a commission for the Seagram Building: it is easy name-recognition on a resumé. I was willing to cast non-white actors for both roles, which widened my audition pool but would provide me with an additional challenge should that be the way I cast the play. It would be, of course, and it would change the meaning of *Red* in a way I was not intending it to when I first thought of directing it.

> *"Director's Log #2 – January 9, 2018*
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> *…theatre is innately unrealistic. It can't be historically accurate the way a film can. Theatre doesn't have realistic exteriors, and it can only go so far with realistic interiors. Lights are meant to reveal the actors to the back row of the audience, not to replicate actual lighting. So no matter what, Rothko's story won't be a detailed retelling of those two years in his studio. If we're going to use invisible canvases, how big of a deal is it if we use actors of color? And so then – is this really Rothko's story? I think so. But it cares more about his essence, who he really was, than what he looked like or where he lived. So then – who was he? A Mad Genius? A Tortured Artist? Or just a guy who was really passionate about art?"*

I ended up casting two black men to play Rothko and Ken. With that decision came the conclusion that realism was not the production's top priority. Interestingly, casting is usually

where biopics are most faithful. It requires the least research and resources – all a director needs for historical accuracy is a photograph of the person and an actor who matches it. No permission needed to film on location, no rifling through antique sales to find a prop. Not only am I not aware of any biopic which casts its characters in different races, but I was informed by a professor in the Department of Drama and Dance that my production of *Red* was likely the first ever to cast black men in the roles of the two artists.

It was clear from the first rehearsal I could not ignore the race of my cast. Rothko specifically refers to his Russian-Jewish heritage, which essentially delineates his whiteness. More prominently, Rothko and Ken have an intense argument over the color black, an argument whose effect changed dramatically when performed by black men. Therefore, the team would need to acknowledge the characters' race and integrate it into Rothko's story. Due to licensing regulations we could not change any of the play's dialogue. Somehow the actors would simply need to convey a tangential narrative through their artistic choices.

> *"Director's Log #5 – February 26, 2018*
>
> *…We talked Rothko finding this need to show Ken how it's done – you're not gonna make it if you act like a black man, you have to assimilate to the white man. His need to be significant and remembered and iconic – to do so you must be a commodity – opposite desires, pulled in two directions. He commodifies his heroes in namedropping them so much. Pollock – white and therefore allowed to get away with shit Rothko couldn't. You love him – he's the douchey white frat boy you can't help but love. Generation gaps lead to ideology gaps."*

In thinking about Rothko's new racial identity I thought deeply about Rothko's upbringing in Russia, and his immigration to America. Even though there were a surprising

number of Russian Jews in the Abstract Expressionist scene in New York, Rothko would still have been an outsider to the American population in general. Logan did us a favor in including so many conversations about Pollock in the play, as that gave us something more to work with and react against. Pollock was the "poster boy,"[385] Rothko was a wannabe. I had Rothko's actor think about that outcast-identity in his portrayal. He needed to prove to this country that he deserved to be here, that there was as much room here for him as a white man from the West. This reminded me of broader Art Historical viewpoints toward the global West and the global East. Historically, American and European cultures only accepted Eastern art when it became relevant for their own societies – Vermeer, for example, could throw a Persian rug over a table in *The Music Lesson*, indifferent toward its intended purpose as a carpet or its non-Dutch heritage. Likewise, how was New York using a black Rothko's works for its own goals, without care toward his origins? How did a black Rothko assimilate?

As rehearsals progressed I found myself more and more in use as a dramaturg, not just director. One of my assistant stage managers admitted she did not realize Rothko was a nonfictional character until after rehearsals had started. I was now tasked with educating my team on Rothko, his works, his life, and his place in Art History. How could they understand the significance his works had at the time when today a painting of his is completely accepted? When abstract art is the norm, not the exception? I began by making reference documents, three of them to be exact. The first was comprised of images of Rothko in his studio alongside quotes from Dan Rice which described his process. This was too simple to be too useful, but felt necessary. The second was picture-based as well. I amassed examples of works from every single artist mentioned in the play and presented them with quotes which contextualized them in

[385] See Note 200.

Red. Each work I chose had a predominant use of red, in order to adhere to the play's theme. Now, when the actors said lines such as "we destroyed Cubism, de Kooning and me and Pollock and Barnett Newman and all the others,"[386] they had a specific reference to understand the differences between these artists and the Cubists. They could specifically visualize how they "destroyed" it.

The final document was the most extensive, a forty-page paper explaining every single reference to a work of art or an art theory, whether it be the "form-follows-function" motto of the Seagram Building, or the "pietà-pose" in which Chatteron and Pollock died, both of which needed further contextualization. I had thought I knew all of this information already, but in compiling facts and opinions I found myself learning as well. I wanted my actors to understand this world and moment in Art History beyond the simple facts they needed to know. I wanted to be able to show them any Lichtenstein (to be fair, one of the most distinct artists I could have chosen) and have them able to identify its maker and approximate time period. If Ed Harris could gain thirty pounds to play Pollock,[387] my actors could learn the difference between a salon and a gallery opening.

> *"Directors Log #3 – February 3, 2017*
>
> *…It's odd: Rothko is the Tortured Artist in that he agonizes over every element of his paintings. They need to be symbolic and yet free from specific meaning. They have to be engaging but not beautiful. They are his children. And yet, his art doesn't seem to stem from any tragedy in the play. Ken, on the other hand, is youthful and bright and excited. But he has a specific tragedy: his parents have been murdered. Moreso, his art directly stems from that tragedy: he paints*

[386] Logan, 15.
[387] See Note 154.

pictures of the men who killed his parents. So even though he has suffered and his art comes from his pain, he does not actually embody any of the Tortured Artist's traits."

Something I struggled with extensively in staging *Red* was reconciling my two roles of director and researcher. I explained my thesis to my team, explaining why I was directing this play, what elements of it concerned me the most, and sparking discussion on the Tortured Artist. But they were far more excited by other aspects of the play. They wanted to talk about artistic philosophy, generational differences, the meaning of family and fatherhood. As a theatre-maker I was also excited by these and eager to work our ideas into the play. I knew I needed to make conclusions regarding trope, media, and Celebrity, but I did not want to force anything. Rather than reroute the natural direction the play was taking, I decided to question what it meant for my actors to be unconcerned with the topic of my thesis.

"Directors Log #4 – February 25, 2018

Just walked into a group of theatre people who were talking about Red. Two were arguing: one had seen the show and hated Rothko, the other sympathized with him. He said he was able to connect with Rothko through this pretention, because he had such similar thoughts about art. Both loved the show and thought the character was interesting, but it's interesting to me to see that divide. It's so real – some people love him and sympathize with him because he's so sad and monumental and important and intelligent and caring, others hate him because he's so rash and self-absorbed and explosive and uncaring. Really, when it comes to his art he is loving and protecting and considerate and well-spoken, but when it

*comes to other people he's lost. Which is counter-intuitive since he makes his art with other human being [*sic*] in mind."*

If some people saw this as a play about a Tortured Artist and his struggle to maintain his identity against the pressures and demands of his Celebrity, I would accept it. But if others saw this play as a dramedy about a "S.O.B.," as one critic put it,[388] and Ken's triumphant defeat of him, I would accept that as well. Just because I wanted to examine the play's use of the Tortured Artist did not mean I had to *make* Rothko a Tortured Artist. After all, that is exactly what I was trying to avoid when I decided to direct this play. If I pushed an agenda of trope so I could prove Logan's play was problematic in its depictions of Rothko I would be making a false statement; only I could be blamed, in fact, for celebritizing the artist through trope. Just as Logan's job was to present the characters honestly, it was my job to present his words honestly.

To answer my own questions, I do not think staging *Red* is inherently "part of the problem" in perpetuating harmful stereotypes. There are checks and balances, so to speak, littered throughout the play to put the power of Celebrity in the director's hands themselves. A director could play up Rothko's allusions to suicide, as I did, to add drama and emotion to the play. On the Friday night performance I sat behind a group of people clearly educated on Rothko's work and life. When the artist said his near-quote "when I commit suicide there won't be any doubt about it," the group gasped, and one of them gestured a slicing motion on her elbows to her friend. I received the reaction I was looking for: the horror in knowing how this story ends and watching it unfold, unable to rewrite history. But a director could later downplay Rothko's Four Seasons monologue in which his faith is finally broken, his paintings complete for

[388] *Tonys 2010.*

a purpose in which he no longer believes. We kept our soundscape and our lighting simple in that moment, not needing to add torment to a character whose words I thought spoke for themselves.

It was important that I staged *Red.* As mentioned in Chapter IV, the text itself does not equal a play, and the words needed to be brought to life to truly understand Logan's work and its effects. I discovered the director's complicity in the process of celebritization, and found within me warring desires to enhance the truth and to present the truth with integrity. It was also *exciting* to stage *Red*, bringing my passions of art and Art History to a community I have been a part of my entire life. I was able to share Rothko's life to people who knew or cared nothing for him and make them react emotionally and intellectually to his story. And I came to a realization I had not considered before: perhaps trope is not always malicious. Yes, it sells magazines. Yes, it accumulates awards. Yes, it feeds into our intrusive need to know every detail about everybody's life, and it disrespects those it takes advantage of. But it makes Art History accessible.

Perhaps *Life* wanted more than to control Pollock. Perhaps they desperately wished there was a way to make people interested in him without dramatizing his character. But they made the choice that celebrating the artist and broadcasting his artistic contributions to the American public was better than keeping him an art-world secret, no matter the cost. Perhaps the papers which turned Rothko's posthumous legal troubles into the "Trial of the Century" wanted more than to perpetuate scandal, the lifesource of the press. Perhaps they wanted to impart the injustice an amazing artist was facing, but could only do so through big headlines.

Perhaps not. Perhaps popular culture is as vapid and shallow as it appears to be. But after entering that world myself I think I can give them the benefit of the doubt. It is what I would want people to give me.

Conclusions

They took the credit for your second symphony, rewritten by machine on new technology… Video killed the radio star! – The Buggles

Despite the intentions of this paper as outlined in the end of the Introduction's first section, the completion of this thesis does seem hypocritical. It sees the harm in the media, defined as "the body of producers who publish information relating to real people," focusing on artists more than it does on art, yet there is little formal analysis in this published information relating to real people. It builds Celebrity and ignores specific artworks. How, then, does this paper contribute to the Art-Historical narrative of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko?

This paper examines the accessibility of art history. Whether it be through a Projected Art History seen in biopic or a one-on-one education seen in the production of *Red*, this thesis inadvertently became an examination in the way not only art, but art *history* is shared. The media publications released during the lives of the two Abstract Expressionists established the values upon which art history would latch when studying and teaching their works. They set a precedent of a psychological examination of art akin to an iconographical approach that looks for symbolism and patterns in works. These symbols and patterns were found in the artists lives rather than their paintings, but that system was nonetheless developing. The posthumous media publications brought that study to a wide-reaching audience, focusing not on assigning value but sharing those preexisting values to an otherwise uninterested body of people. Despite their flaws, *Pollock* and *Red* each show a deep love for their subject matter, imbuing that passion to the primary audiences of their respective fields. Of all the media sources cited in this paper, they are the ones which best handle the problems of trope and Celebrity.

There are many reasons *Pollock* and *Red* were more successful than their 1950s counterparts. First, they are posthumous representations, meaning that their creation can only impact the public opinion on the artists; they can not impact their careers or their lives in any way. They also lack a responsibility journalistic media forms have in only publishing accurate facts. It is assumed when watching both works that creative license has been taken, and audiences have an expectation of heightened drama they do not expect with magazines or newspapers. *Pollock* and *Red* also each showed significant awareness of the dangers of trope and sensationalism. Although they incorporated stereotype, they additionally incorporated characters or scenes who countered those stereotypes, offering multiple perspectives and interpretations into the lives of their respective artists. Harris and *Pollock* aimed to portray an artist with both extreme accuracy and with the oft-hidden aspects of their life. Logan and *Red* let the audience arrive at its own conclusions by having the play's characters debate the very issues of the tools the writer is using.

Ultimately, the media cannot avoid considering an artist's life whenever it interacts with their work, whether it be in magazines, in video recordings, in film interpretations, or playscripts. "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of his life... It follows that anything is relevant to it."[389] But too often these considerations into the artist-art relationship are unnecessary: exhibition reviews comment on the artist's personality and academics turn to biography when they become unable to "think more" and find inspiration in an artwork itself. This has the effect of an artwork's value becoming regulated by who made it, rather than its own intrinsic qualities. This is the way the art market currently operates, which creates an unjust elitism and sense of competition among all

[389] Rosenberg, 23.

members of the art world. Furthermore, the artwork's primary value is a monetary one, not an aesthetic one, as an artist's popularity increases their works' prices, regardless of whether or not they are selling. From this an art historical standard is also established: Pollock only needed to produce one drip painting to shatter open the conventions of art. Rothko only needed one multiform to do the same. The following iterations of their paintings then do not affect art history, but are nonetheless considered art historically significant. This is because these Celebrity artists themselves made these works, elevating each to a higher cultural importance, compounded by their market value.

It would be difficult at this point in history to separate the myth of Pollock and Rothko from the way their works are interpreted. With all of these consequences in mind it is interesting to wonder – what if *Life* and Namuth never documented Pollock's process? While he likely would not have achieved the same level of fame, would his paintings be considered differently? Or would they have value regardless of the knowledge of how they were created? Or what if critics did not ubiquitously love every Rothko painting, but instead judged them individually? Would the artist have been more receptive to his increasing fame if he felt it justified, and not like he was selling-out?

These questions are near-impossible to answer, but are questions that should be asked with every contemporary artist whose reputation seems more important than their work. While artists can delineate clear messages in their statements, others have left their art to interpretation, as did Pollock and Rothko. In fact, the two artists made numerous statements in their lives that there was nothing to see in their paintings – Pollock's were pure abstractions and Rothko's were about reaction, not content. Making a narrative for their body of works from the facts of their

lives directly contradicts their intentions, disrespecting them. Care should be taken not to repeat this mistake with artists who have not yet been judged by Art History.

It is interesting to note that *Pollock* is part of the canon of Art History itself, whereas *Red* is not. With an increasing attempt to include film among the realm of other artistic mediums, it can be analyzed as a work of art with regards to formal elements, iconography, semiotics, and more. As a play *Red* is not afforded this privilege. It has already been stated that at its heart it is only text, existing without any visual canon at all. *Pollock* therefore has a larger responsibility toward aesthetics which *Red* does not. Future biopics must keep this in mind. *Pollock* becomes part of an odd circle of referentially, needing its artist's paintings to exist, and then repurposing them and reinserting them into a new place in Art History. *Red*, however, can only reference Art History, unable to join its ranks.

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