-Research Article-

An Interdisciplinary Neoformalist Approach to Loving Vincent[1]

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Abstract

This paper discusses Loving Vincent, the first animated film to recreate Vincent van Gogh's painting style through a digitized multisensory experience. Blending traditional painting and digital cinema is innovative to shape the film's narrative. Thus, the analysis used a neoformalist interdisciplinary approach referring to the philosophy of art and the concept of otherness and focused on the film's novel narrative and formal features. It aimed to answer how Loving Vincent possessed formal and narrative features that would raise questions and lead the viewer to judge otherness. In the film, 21st-century transnational audiences witnessed van Gogh's multiple 'Otherness'. The film questioned the facts surrounding the death of a brilliant painter, whether it was murder or suicide, leaving the viewer with a hypothesis that can neither be confirmed nor falsified. In conclusion, van Gogh's paintings and charcoal animation fused with digital features such as sound, editing, close-ups, music, and screen size are essential advantages that strengthen the viewer's meaning-making process. Based on neoformalist and artistic philosophy, this paper revealed that the innovative fusion of multisensory digital and traditional meaning-making served as a pioneering guide drawing on a kind of self-narrative of paintings. The film's interdisciplinary features can initiate meaningful discussions.

Keywords *Vincent van Gogh, Neoformalist Approach, Philosophy of Art, Otherness, Interdisciplinarity*

-Araştırma Makalesi-

Loving Vincent Filmine Disiplinlerarası Neoformalist Bir Yaklaşım

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Özet

Bu makale, Vincent van Gogh'un resim tarzını dijitalleştirilmiş çoklu duyusal bir deneyimle yeniden üreten Loving Vincent başlıklı ilk animasyon filmi tartışmıştır. Filmde, anlatıyı şekillendirmek için geleneksel resim sanatı ve dijital sinemanın harmanlanması yenilik sağlamaktadır. Bu nedenle analiz, filmin yeni anlatı ve biçimsel özelliklerine odaklanıp sanat felsefesi ve ötekilik kavramına atıfta bulunarak neoformalist disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşımla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Dolayısıyla çalışma Loving Vincent filminin soru işaretleri yaratacak ve izleyiciyi ötekilik konusunda değerlendirme yapmaya yöneltecek biçimsel ve anlatısal özelliklere ne şekilde sahip olduğunu yanıtlamayı amaçlamıştır. 21. yüzyılın ulusötesi izleyicileri filmde van Gogh'un çoklu 'Ötekiliğine' tanıklık etmiştir. Film, dahi bir ressamın ölümünü çevreleyen gerçekleri, bunun cinayet mi yoksa intihar mı olduğunu sorgulamış ve izleyiciyi ne doğrulanabilen ne de yanlışlanabilen bir hipotezle baş başa bırakmıştır. Sonuç olarak, van Gogh'un resimleri ve kara kalem animasyonunun ses, kurgu, yakın çekim, müzik ve ekran boyutu gibi dijital özelliklerle birleştirilmesi, izleyicinin anlam yaratma sürecini güçlendiren önemli avantajlardır. Neoformalist yaklaşıma ve sanat felsefesine dayanan bu makale, Loving Vincent filmindeki yenilikçi çok duyulu dijital-geleneksel anlam kaynaşmasının, resimlerin bir tür öz-anlatısına dayanan öncü bir rehber olarak hizmet ettiğini ortaya koymuştur. Filmin disiplinler arası özellikleri anlamlı tartışmalar başlatma potansiyeline sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Vincent van Gogh, Neoformalist Yaklaşım, Sanat Felsefesi, Ötekilik, Disiplinlerarasılık*

Introduction

Films made about Vincent van Gogh were primarily created using traditional cinema methods (see, for example, Minelli, 1956; Schnabel, 2019).[1] However, Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman's *Loving Vincent* (2017) has pioneering methodological and epistemological features as an animated film that blends painting and cinema. Traditional films usually depict van Gogh's experiences of otherness to a large extent. According to Clark, the biographical films about Vincent van Gogh produced in the last half of the twentieth century have created distorted misconceptions based on fictional and loose facts (2002, p. 84). However, *Loving Vincent* takes the narrative to a different place with its formal characteristics. Like this film, this article also has an interdisciplinary nature. It adopts a neoformalist approach as a method of analysis and draws on the philosophy of art.

In *Loving Vincent*, what happens to van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise, his last stop due to his supposedly sinful and insane 'Otherness', are the social and cultural conflicts witnessed throughout the film. Before understanding the concept of otherness, it is necessary to address the dialectical concept of 'We/Self'. According to Habermas, the consciousness of 'We' is based on imaginary blood ties and cultural identities adopted by people who see themselves as members of the same community (1998, p. 130). In *Loving Vincent*, those who see themselves as members of the same community, namely us, are the majority of the people of the town he lives in and most of his family members in the early years of his life. This article focuses on his exclusion by the contemporary society (we) in which he lives. The film goes beyond whether van Gogh was a mad, irreligious, strange, eccentric artist and tries to understand whether his death was an accident, murder or suicide.

Since it is not always possible to reveal the truth, it is important to investigate whether *Loving Vincent* can raise questions in the audience because the film attempts to go beyond popular and stereotypical discourses. Stereotypes, whether positive or negative, can be dangerous. Because the image of an artist who has suffered can present a simplified, distorted, harmful and generalized image for religious, mental, spiritual or intellectual reasons, and epistemological dangers arise when various scientific, philosophical and artistic information about artists has speculative-popular characteristics.

This study seeks to answer how van Gogh's late-period experiences and distinctive aspects such as religiosity/irreligiosity, madness and immigration shape the identity of the 'Other' in terms of narrative and form in *Loving Vincent*. It aims to answer how *Loving Vincent* has formal and narrative features that create question marks and push the audience to make a judgment about otherness. For this reason, the neoformalist analysis developed by Kristin Thompson (1981, 1988) was preferred.

Methodology

In this study, a neoformalist analysis is used on the style and narrative features of *Loving Vincent*, the representation of van Gogh's identity as the 'Other' during his life and what truths the film can reveal and make the audience rethink after his death. The neoformalist approach focuses not only on producing an emotional response to a work of art but also on perception, feeling and reasoning (Thompson, 1988, p. 10). This approach uses conceptual tools or devices such as mise en scene, narrative, visual style or performance, depending on the film (Blewitt, 1997, p. 93). *Loving Vincent*'s unusual and original formal features make it a suitable film for the

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[1] Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, Netherlands, and died on 29 July 1890 in Auvers-sur-Oise, France.

neoformalist approach. For example, Thomson (1981) chose Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958)[2] to analyse its strangeness, because it is so greatly different from other films with its striking qualities. "Ivan's actors stare oddly, pause a great deal, and make abrupt gestures. (…) Space in general seems warped, both within and between shots." (p. 4). According to Thomson, a film can create various strategies for defamiliarization by adding different elements to the basic events of the story (ibid., p. 41). Neoformalist methodology provides the critic with tools to answer a specific range of questions. Focusing on defamiliarization, the system looks for a film's complex and original tendencies (ibid. pp. 59–60): Thomson concentrates on the film's deviations from classical narrative cinema:

> (…) a perception of a film that includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures (including conventions) at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements that escape unifying impulses. Such an approach to viewing films can allow us to look further into a film, renewing its ability to intrigue us by its strangeness. It also can help us to be aware of how the whole film—not just its narrative—works upon our perceptions. (ibid., p. 302).

Neoformalist analysis can potentially raise theoretical issues, such as the experience of otherness, through the film that represents van Gogh's life. According to Thompson, an analysis explores not only the film but also the variety of possibilities of cinema as a medium. Neoformalist analysis constructs itself and offers a series of broad assumptions about how works of art are created and how they work to direct audience response (1988, p. 6). "Understanding is mediated by transformative acts, both "bottom-up"-mandatory, automatic ·psychological processes-and "top-down"-conceptual, strategic ones.The sensory data of the film at hand furnish the materials from which inferential processes of perception and cognition build meanings" (Bordwell, 1991, p. 3). In this way, the focus can be on the cognitive-emotional meaning-making of the film. The director activates the meanings in the film and guides the audience in making sense of the film (see ibid.). The viewer actively interacts with the text using certain abilities acquired from their cultural and knowledge-based environment (Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1981). Bordwell tries to explain the formal conditions under which viewers comprehend a film. Here, the term "spectator" does not refer to a specific person. Also, it is not an "ideal reader", a concept that describes the best possible viewer who is adequate to understand every meaning in the text. Instead, Bordwell uses the term "viewer" or "spectator" to refer to a hypothetical entity who constructs a story from the representation of the film. The spectator is active; "his or her experience is cued by the text, according to intersubjective protocols that may vary" (1985, p. 30).

As in the words of Bordwell, "across the history of visual art, artists create conventions, pictorial schemata, which viewers learn to tally with their ordinary schemata for recognizing objects in space"(ibid., 1985, p. 102). However, as Blewitt also points out similar to Bordwell and Thomson, "art works to defamiliarize the everyday". Certain film texts can also defamiliarize the ideological conventions of classical Hollywood cinema (1997, pp. 93-94). Therefore, the post-impressionist sections of the film allow van Gogh to introduce and express himself in his style. The difference between impressionist and post-impressionist temporalities guides the viewer chronologically and interpretively. The music added to the animated van Gogh style also shows the emotional aspect. This new interdisciplinary-experimental film work, *Loving Vincent*, has a defamiliarizing feature for the viewer who has some knowledge about van Gogh. In previous related traditional productions, van Gogh could not express himself in such a neo-form. Therefore, the research section of the article will focus on the narrative and formal dimensions of the film.

Here, the concepts of *fabula* (sometimes translated as "story") and syuzhet (often translated as "plot") are essential to understand. *Fabula* embodies action as a chronological,

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[2] Part I of Ivan the Terrible was released in 1944, and Part II was screened in 1958. However, Eisenstein died in 1948 and did not complete Part III.

cause-and-effect chain taking place in a given duration and a spatial field, and *syuzhet* is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film. "Putting the fabula together requires us to construct the story of the ongoing inquiry while at the same time framing and testing hypotheses about past events." *Syuzhet* is a system because it arranges components, such as a particular pattern of events, such as actions, scenes, turning points and plot twists (Bordwell, 1985, pp. 49–50).

At this point, it is necessary to give some examples from the literature in terms of the application of the method. Can Kızılöz's doctoral study searches whether the conventions of old cinema have changed or not, by selecting four films from four directors (Ceylan, 2011; Erdem, 2016; Karaçelik, 2018; Ünlü, 2013) from the New Turkish Cinema through the neo-formalist approach that defines the viewer as an active person who constructs the story by interpreting the given formal elements. He compared the differences between the old and new forms, including limitations, subjectivity/objectivity, style, plot, narrative world, chronology, contingency, and narrative mode. He pointed out an important change in these. For example, in terms of style, the new Turkish cinema uses techniques to understand the character and story world (Kızılöz, 2025, p. 341). Leila Naserbakht and Alireza Sayyad examine how Bahram Beyzai's film *Maybe Some Other Time* (Beyzai, 1988) depicts dreams through a 'neoformalist approach'. Analysing the way dream images are formed and their properties in the human mind, they found that the film uses shooting and editing techniques to create a personal feeling. The film also reveals the influence of successful cinematic techniques from world cinema that mimic personal experiences (Naserbakht & Sayyad, 2024).

Otherness at the Intersection of Religion and Madness

While van Gogh is often an Other, 'We/Ourselves' are his family, various religious institutions and the last place he lived in the film. It is possible to associate van Gogh with the hated, other identity. Tuğrul Çomu and Mutlu Binark divide hate speech into six types according to its target people and groups. These are political, misogynist, anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant, sexual identity, belief and sect-related, disabled and various patient-related hate speech (Binark & Çomu, 2013, pp. 209–210). People who are claimed by many societies to have mental health problems or are considered to be sinful or affiliated with different religions/sects are minorities subjected to hate speech and crime. Also, being extremely religious is a reason for exclusion by less religious people and groups in certain societies. Van Gogh is an excluded and hated person for three reasons: belonging to a different or intense belief and sect (or vice versa, his distance from religion), foreign and immigrant background and various illnesses.

His rejection by religious authorities caused him to be marginalized due to his paintings, religious perception and/or (so-called) mental illness. However, after his death, van Gogh became a transnational artist and the myth of the tortured artist. It is possible to see those who stoned and excluded him as aggressive and antagonistic characters through *Loving Vincent* in 2017. However, in modern societies, mental illnesses and psychiatric and neurological disorders are still criteria for othering. In Auvers-sur-Oise, Vincent van Gogh is also an immigrant, and a new discussion may bring an epistemic layer to the literature and discussions about him. The societies, which are considered normal by certain standards, often marginalize people with (so-called) mental disorders, members of other religions/sects or the non-religious, and minorities such as homosexuals. Such exclusions are the underlying elements of conflicts in the films. Hunka points to a case for several well-known (Western) artists, including William Blake, Robert Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway and Vincent Van Gogh. As people with neurological disabilities, they have often been persecuted as the 'other' and variously accused of being sinful, sexually repressed, irrevocably mad and animalistic (Solomon and Erenreich cited in Hunka, 2016, p. 100). As Foucault points out in his work, *The History of Madness*, modern people no longer communicated with the mad; there was no longer a common

language (unlike in the Middle Ages). Madness was considered a mental illness at the end of the eighteenth century (2013). It is no coincidence that van Gogh lived during this time.

The mentally unbalanced 'Other' has been depicted as talented, intuitive and blessed in other historical periods of the West (Solomon and Erenreich cited in Hunka, 2016, p. 100). The twenty-first century is another example of this. The old 'Other', who is seen as talented, sacred and genius, glorified by societies at different times, has reached a transnational level of representation and discourse by crossing cultural and geographical borders in this century. These are crossings beyond geopolitical, cultural, social or intellectual borders. As in the crossing of community borders, in Habermas's words (1998, pp. xxxv–xxxvi), equal respect for everyone is not only specific to those like us; it extends to the person of the other in his otherness. "And solidarity with the other as one of us refers to the flexibility of substantive determination and extends its permeable boundaries ever further." However, a question here requires dialectical thinking: If van Gogh had stretched the boundaries of society and been included in society, would he and his works have gone beyond the boundaries after his death? Clark provides an interpretative answer to this question:

> Had Vincent van Gogh lived to old age and financially prospered as an artist during his time, it is uncertain what his legacy would be today. Certainly, his art would be valuable and his name well known, but the extent of his popularity and his place in history as a cultural phenomenon is likely to have been greatly diminished. (2002, p. 103)

The effect of van Gogh's alienation from mainstream society's religious beliefs on his other identity should not be ignored. Indeed, Carskaddon makes a synthesis with various references; Hegel and Butler's theories explain the necessity of othering religion in order to create a self, and Mary Douglas defines it as the act of personifying another person's religious evil or wrong perception (Hegel, Butler and Douglas cited in Carskaddon, 2017, p. 2). At first, his family ostracized van Gogh because of his fanatic religiosity (Van Gogh, 2013, p. 9; Wallace, 1969, p. 11); after his problems with the church, both his father and the community marginalized him.

Neoformalist Analysis of the Movie *Loving Vincent*

In this part of the study, *Loving Vincent* will be analysed using the neoformalist method. In addition to the original and new form of the film, the narrative will focus on the theory of otherness and the philosophy of art. Therefore, through the story and narrative, it will be investigated to learn what is (un)true about van Gogh and to guide the audience through a new interdisciplinary impressionist and post-impressionist form.

Learning the (Un)Truth About van Gogh Through the Story and Narrative

Story

Loving Vincent (2017) is an experimental film directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman. A co-production of Poland and the United Kingdom, the film is a one-hour and 34-minute biographical animation made with oil paintings and charcoal drawings. The film deals with the final life experiences of Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, particularly the circumstances leading up to his death. The work falls into the categories of biography, animation, thriller, and drama. It is composed of colour oil paintings after van Gogh's death and depicts flashbacks before his death through black and white animated images. One hundred and twenty people made approximately 65,000 paintings for the film, and the filmmakers used approximately one hundred of van Gogh's paintings as backgrounds to create a moving image. The painters who worked on the film came from different professions, such as teaching and cooking, and received training before creating the paintings in this film (see Loving Vincent - Meet the Painters, 2017). Such a hybrid continuity exhibits neoformalist characteristics regarding the film's structure.

The animated film *Loving Vincent* investigates whether van Gogh was murdered. The setting is the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, about thirty kilometres north of Paris/France, where the painter spent his final months and died. A year after his death (1891), mail carrier Roulin asks his son Armand to deliver the painter's undeliverable letter to Vincent's brother Theo. Although Armand seems dissatisfied with his father's assignment, he travels to Auvers-sur-Oise, where Vincent's close friend, Dr Gachet, lives. He tries to see the doctor but must wait for him to return from Paris. Armand also meets the villagers who are inspired and modelled by van Gogh's art and learns more about Vincent.

Loving Vincent becomes a detective story with many suspicious details surrounding his death. "How could a man go from being completely calm to suicidal in six weeks?" Armand asks. Art history often immortalizes the genius van Gogh as a mad and tormented artist. However, the filmmakers Kobiela and Welchman try to paint a loving and sensitive portrait of the artist who, as the film's title suggests, sent letters to his brother signed "Loving Vincent."

Narrative

Was Vincent van Gogh killed? The film tries to answer this question chronologically with flashbacks and post-impressionist scenes. *Loving Vincent* hypothesises that two young men killed Vincent by mistake. Throughout the film, concrete evidence confirms this hypothesis or invites the viewer to believe it, while traces of van Gogh's suicide are also presented. This approach adds objectivity and a multifaceted perspective to the film. However, proving whether something is true or false is sometimes impossible. Also, what is known to be true may be untrue or partly true. Therefore, Antoni Tàpies put it, a good work of art should shock, provoke and confuse the viewer. Art is not reality but an object or sign that presents it to the mind (2014, p. 41).

The flashback scenes in the film show the family's marginalization in his early life. His parents named Vincent after his older brother, who died a year before he was born. As in Emmons' words, Vincent was a substitute for someone else—he was also someone else—and was born to grieving parents who took him for their dead child. Therefore, Vincent's relationship with his mother was fragile from the beginning (1968, p. 11). *Loving Vincent* associates his mother's cold behaviour with this in his childhood memories. However, the film represents the support and trust of his brother Theo, one of the protagonists, especially in painting. This portrayal provides diverse characters within the family, even if most of its members exclude van Gogh. In *Loving Vincent*, the villagers in his socio-cultural environment also have heterogeneous attitudes towards van Gogh because some torture the artist, while others do not. For example, the fact that the servant of Dr Gachet, one of the antagonists of the film, describes van Gogh as evil refers to religious othering. In response to Armand's question, "Is this a medical opinion?" the woman's response "I could tell at first glance will end trouble", is a prejudiced expression (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017, 23:58-24:45). Mental-religious othering is perceived in the woman's words. Later in the film, the line between Armand and the servant reinforces the discourse of religious exclusion:

- Oh, glad to see you're honouring God, unlike your friend.

- My father's friend.

- You know Vincent actually did his ungodly act on a Sunday?

- That's not the half of it. I saw him that day. I was on my way to church. Laughing and joking with those Sacretain boys, drinking, they were laughing at God with those lads on the day of his death.

- Where was that?

- Well, it was right here, exactly here. Scribbling and scrawling away, he was as always. (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017, 00:38:16-00:56:49)

Contrary to the above discourse that marginalizes van Gogh, in *Loving Vincent*, the postal deliveryman Roulin's observation is rooted in inclusiveness, tolerance and empathy that van Gogh's mental health was also affected by the stoning of peasant children, his prediction that even healthy people can be turned upside down by life—moreover, his observations about van Gogh's health are based on his regular letters to his brother, and he disbelieves in his suicide. Several other people testify to Van Gogh's possible murder and say he was a loving person and in good mental health. However, some peasants are far from understanding van Gogh and are exclusionary; they conclude that he has a mental illness or is a sinner. When looking at some studies, there are vague and different arguments about his mental health, such as the ambiguity in the film *Loving Vincent*. For example, according to Arnold, Vincent van Gogh was not mentally disturbed (1993, p. 344). However, some studies suggest that van Gogh was a tormented artist and may have committed suicide (Hunka, 2016, p. 100). The real issue is whether he suffered from an external 'Otherness', such as being hated, ostracized, stoned and discriminated against by society. Thus, it is necessary to look at the relationship between such a fragmenting social structure and art. Can such a hateful social structure be distant from art? While listing his general observations on art, Tolstoy attributes art to the human world and determines that it is the definition of the chain in which people can feel and think within the framework of moral rules. He attributes the increase in people's malevolent and hostile spirit to the art deficiency (Tolstoy, 2004, pp. 109–110). On the other hand, Plato believes that fairy tales told to adults and children should be banned if they are wrong because art can have misleading and deceptive features (2016, pp. 66–67). When we synthesize these two views, we can conclude that art is heterogeneous; certain works of art are suitable for the spirit of societies, and some are not. However, for a painter who was despised and humiliated in his work, *Loving Vincent*, and recognized as the father of modern art after his death, it is unlikely that he and his work will harm society.

While the psychological and religious exclusion of van Gogh has been discussed so far, it is also necessary to question the state of mind of those around him who committed violence against him dialectically. For example, some people in the village stone him while he is painting. Such violence raises the following questions: Who is mad, who is not, and who has committed a sin? The stone throwers or van Gogh? At this point, for example, Öztürk and Yıldız's study (2016, p. 7) on the representation of madness in Milos Forman's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest " dissects the arbitrary closures and power relations associated with mental illness (1975). Mc. Murphy, as an outsider, a lazy man who does not want to work, opposes being hospitalized because he is suspected of being "crazy": "What do you think you are, for Christ's sake, crazy or something'? Well, you're not! You're not! You're no crazier than the average asshole out walkin' around on the streets, and that's I" (Forman, 1975, 00:53-01:04). The people who make van Gogh suffer in his contemporary society do not respect his cultural diversity on religious and mental levels. However, van Gogh's attitudes and behaviours are diverse, show flexibility, inclusiveness and integration, and have no radical boundaries.

The dominant mentalist ideology at that time (Foucault, 2013) may have tried to create the delusion of suicide, that the person is crazy, sinful, strange, mentally ill, in other words, 'Other', a stigmatizing and questionable death. *Loving Vincent* aims to create empathy and reveal the truth about the possibility of murder and the possibility of being a sane person, which this ideology tries to hide. Through the stories of the villagers, it is possible to recognize van Gogh as a social and posthumous structure, as in Ruiz's words:

In contrast to the individual/community opposition that is a fixed trope of the biopic model, Loving Vincent tells its story from the point of view of society; the subject, unfortunately, cannot speak for himself, and therefore it is his paintings that legitimize his ambi-

guous or transgressive behaviors. The great artist thus appears to be a construct; and in the case of *Loving Vincent*'s Van Gogh, a social and posthumous construct. (2021, p. 103)

In *Loving Vincent*, lines from van Gogh's letters and paintings speak for van Gogh alongside the villagers. "Who am I in the eyes of most people?" Armand asks in a letter from Vincent toward the end of the film (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017,1:24:32). The letter, dated July 6, 1882, from the painter to his brother Theo:

> A nobody, a non-entity, an unpleasant person. Someone who has not and never will have any position in society. In short, the lowest of the low. Well then, even if that were all absolutely true, then one day I will have to show by my work what this nobody, this non-entity, has in his heart. (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017, 1:24:33-1:25:11; Van Gogh, 2013, p. 220)

In today's digital world and cinema, it is much more possible to bring together projections of otherness at a transnational level with societies of different cultural and socio-economic levels. In the van Gogh film, the protagonist is the Other, while the 'We/I' characters are the antagonists: his family, members of some religious institutions, and many people in the town where he lives.

Throughout history, people who practice different religions have found many works of art and artists socially and culturally unacceptable when they believed that art would not align with religious values, citing ideological reasons for excluding artists. Tolstoy states that religion is important in determining whether a work of art is excellent or evokes bad feelings. For example, in monotheistic Judaism, works of art that convey the laws of the religion are considered high art. In contrast, artworks that depict the worship of other gods are viewed as terrible. In Buddhism, art is good if it elevates the soul, and bad if it inflames physical passions (2004, pp. 112–116). However, van Gogh has an approach that aligns with universal religious values. His belief in loving everything is not exclusive but inclusive and constructive, as in his own words: "The best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife, something-whatever you like -[and] you will be on the way to knowing more about Him: that is what I say to myself. But one must love with a loft) and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence" (Van Gogh, 2013, p. 155). According to Ruiz, *Loving Vincent* aims for grandeur and transcendence, contradicted at the climax, where we hear van Gogh's voice describing himself as an ordinary man aspiring to be creative (Ruiz, 2021, p. 107).

To Guide the Viewer through a New Form of Interdisciplinary Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Art

In *Loving Vincent*, as in the post-impressionist movement, a certain amount of reality was recreated with van Gogh's drawings and paintings, and instead of natural ones, colours that represented his emotions were used. Eunha Son stated that this film effectively depicted symbols, paradoxes, and moods with its complex use of colour. In particular, yellow, which is often associated with van Gogh, is frequently portrayed in the film. For van Gogh, it symbolizes both joy and agility and his struggle with psychiatric problems because when yellow is turned in a negative direction, it creates a disturbing feeling. Van Gogh paired yellow heavily with blue, which has different qualities. At the same time, using achromatic and soft charcoal drawings, which create a textural contrast with oil paintings, strengthened the expression of the distant and dreamlike atmosphere of the past (2023, p. 824). Therefore, the scenes after van Gogh's death have both positive and negative emotions related to heterogeneous colour preferences.

While some thinkers, such as Balzac and Baudelaire, consider art as work creation (Lenoir, 2003) , mimetic, intentional, and constructionist approaches to representation by the famous theorist Stuart Hall (1997, pp. 24–25) are essential at this point. Because the pro-Van Gogh and antagonistic characters and the representation of the Hero as the 'Other' and 'Alter' are based

on imitative elements. On the other hand, with music and cinematographic post-impressionist elements, there is a constructivist representation that tries to empathize and persuade.
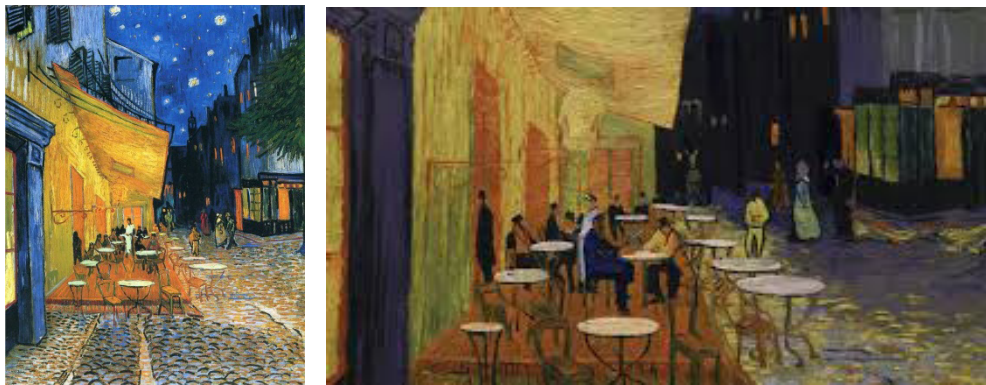
In *Loving Vincent*, the impressionistic flashbacks leading up to van Gogh's death are dominated by a charcoal and black-and-white aesthetic. The film captures how different acquaintances perceived the artist, synthesizing contrasting perspectives with those who accused him of madness and evil. After his death, the film shifts to vibrant post-impressionist colours and vibrations. In the flashbacks, a more natural painting technique inspired by the impressionist movement is observed, as the impressions are more apparent than the artists' ideas. The detective texture and tragic ending are reminiscent of *film noir*. The film's music is like a lament from the filmmakers, adding more emotion to post-impressionism.

Figures 1-2: Examples of film frames from impressionist-style pencil-drawn motion pictures in *Loving Vincent* (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017)

Van Gogh's style, post-impressionism art, subjective colours, patterns and paintings are included as props, decor and actors in the scenes after his death. Unlike impressionism, it is an experiment in bringing Vincent's personality and spirit to the screen with unnaturally moving colours. Although he can be distinguished before his death with his black-and-white aesthetics, van Gogh's influence continued after his death, and the colourfulness of his paintings reached global recognition. *Loving Vincent* has provided transnational and global mourning since its release in 2017. Here, it is also necessary to remember the contribution of global internet television streams, online and offline film festivals and cinemas to ensure van Gogh's transnationality. As Buonanno also stated, travelling narratives, that is, international television broadcasts, can expand our imaginary geography, encounter the other and the far away, and create a fictitious sense of place (2008, pp. 108–109). In the millennium, van Gogh multiplies himself by constructing and republishing himself through his paintings, transcending borders through technology. *Loving Vincent* encounters his audience in the position of the 'Other' or the 'Self' from a distance or nearby. Therefore, van Gogh is a dead man in the post-impressionist scenes; however, his spirit, projected in his style, is still present throughout the film.

Figures 3-4: One of the examples of Vincent van Gogh's painting 'Café de Terrace at Night' (1888) has been animated by adapting it to the size of a movie screen using the tilt technique (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017).

According to Tolstoy, artistic value increases if reality can be understood (2004). *Loving Vincent* uses clear contextual and aesthetic language. Dialogues, short and straightforward

sentences, explicit scenes, setting and plot make the film understandable. Instead of elitist, inaccessible and complex emotions, it uses a simple language that the general audience can understand. The mimetic representation of reality used about eight hundred letters and about one hundred paintings of van Gogh as references. The film is also the shadow of van Gogh's works, letters and style, like the "shadow of reality" in Plato's definition of art (Platon, 2016, pp. 231–237). In this context, a film that tries to reveal the truth also proves the difficulties of finding the truth. The film follows van Gogh's mostly incomplete evidence-based imitation of the last periods of his life, his rejection by religious institutions and some information about his family.

Like a sentence by van Gogh: "We cannot speak other than by our paintings" (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017, 01:47). Ruiz, also referring to Moral, sees this quote as a starting point as necessary in two respects: First, it is a material anchored in history, taken from the letter that Vincent never sent to Theo; second, the filmmakers use van Gogh's own words, biographical films move from reality to a fairy tale, but they always try to tell us with the painter's work and not to know, but to believe (Ruiz, 2021, p. 99). *Loving Vincent* can offer a more convincing emotional power than information based on incomplete evidence because art history or other van Gogh films are primarily based on letters and testimonies. In this film, we see what van Gogh was like with his colours, impasto and lively style, which is to introduce himself to the 21st-century audience in the age of technology. Van Gogh's style is both content and form, so Van Gogh's formal power in creating an emotional effect should be remembered for more information about the emotional and cognitive impact of content and form in film language (see Bordwell, 1991; Robertson, 1967). Soykan's views on emotional education are important in this context: "Emotions derived from works of art are very suitable for emotional education. Emotional education is also necessary for moral actions" (2020, p. 335). Kolker also stated that movies ask us to react with our emotions and reason about the world, assuming that good, and bad people are defined and even suggesting ethical solutions to problems (2016, p. 293). In *Loving Vincent*, we can put empathy and respect first in order to educate emotions. With such moral gains and common sense, we are less likely to exclude or commit violence against those who are outside the majority groups that are considered non-normal and who are perceived as foreign, different, strange or unusual.

Loving Vincent allows van Gogh to transcend boundaries and present himself through his reproduced and digitized multisensory paintings. Contrary to Benjamin's specific views that the reproducibility of technology is detrimental to the uniqueness and aura of art (2020), it is positive that performance in a cinema enhances the viewer's perception rather than a single painting. However, in Kolker's words, "They even suggest ethical solutions to the problems of how we should act in the world. (...) Yet when compared to a novel or a painting or a symphony, the emotional demands made by many films seem shallow and unambiguous" (2016, p. 293). In *Loving Vincent*, the cinematic transformation of van Gogh's paintings and style through sound, music, and editing offers more perspective. Close-ups, accelerated or sloweddown movements and different camera techniques give the viewer a better understanding. Of course, in the cinema, the viewer cannot fully experience the aura of the here and now and van Gogh's impasto aura as seen in an exhibition of van Gogh's paintings. However, the opportunity for the masses to see the form of the moving image on a transnational level, accompanied by music and sound, is more valuable than the chance for only a privileged few to see van Gogh's work.

In *Loving Vincent*, looking at the harmony of music with the art of painting is essential in constructing meaning. The film's soundtrack uses Dolby Digital technology and is in harmony with the film's overall structure. According to Hwang, the dramatic and tragic melodies and lyrics stimulate the audience's multiple senses: "Therefore, the auditory elements added and synchronised to the visual images provide a new experience to the film and a deeper understanding of the situation in the viewer's mind" (2021, p. 23). The closing music, "Starry,

Starry Night", depicts van Gogh's loneliness and pain by referencing his "Starry Night" painting. It is one of the artist's most famous paintings, and part of his biography is incorporated into this song. Music and non-diegetic sound are typical of traditional film narratives. However, in this new form of animated oil painting, music is integrated as a stylistic element and plays a role in the narrative. In addition, this music is derived from the painting "Starry Night". Therefore, a fusion has occurred between painting, music and cinema disciplines.

Figures 5-6-7: Fusion of cinema and painting: Dr Gachet in front of the Green Screen (left), van Gogh's Dr Gachet painting (centre) and animation frame (right)(Loving Vincent - the World's First Fully Painted Feature Film, 2017)

Loving Vincent can make the audience confront prejudice, discrimination and racism in society, the humiliation and exploitation of the works of people who are considered exceptional and crazy but are geniuses. The life of Vincent van Gogh is portrayed in a colourful, restless, and vivid way in his artistic works. The film, in which the beauty of art adorns the artist, resonates with the audience, allowing him to express his other identity through his paintings. The discourses and representations of other figures who witnessed the artist's last months are heterogeneous. Like a scientific study based on different dialectical sources, the film attempts to reveal the truth from multiple perspectives within a detective story.

Van Gogh has the potential to break down prejudices about himself with *Loving Vincent*. As a person labelled as crazy during his time and throughout history, he appears to the twenty-first-century audience as someone full of creative and human emotions. The film tells the story of a person who, in today's norms, has a transnational character due to his immigrant background and multilingualism. He reads books, draws pictures, writes letters, and does not harm anyone, exhibiting characteristics different from those of the general public. However, his exclusion, alienation and demonization by some people can go as far as slander or the fact that he killed himself because he allegedly had severe mental and spiritual problems. This situation is also related to individuals excluded by most societies today because of their unique characteristics and because they are not considered to be (so-called) normal. However, many people Armand interviews in the film make positive comments about van Gogh's health and behaviour, thus distancing society from a generalized representation.

Conclusion

This article discussed socio-cultural concepts such as madness, religiosity / irreligiosity and alienation in *Loving Vincent*. By examining these concepts in van Gogh's life, a theoretical discussion has been initiated to analyse *Loving Vincent* with a neoformalist approach and philosophy of art. Thus, van Gogh's most important problem in the film, his mental-religious otherness, has been addressed with its narrative and formal features and tried to be better understood. According to the findings, the film gave the viewer an original cognitive and emotional experience through its narration and filmic techniques, allowing van Gogh to express himself through his colours and mise-en-scene. Such a viewing experience has epistemological and methodological value even without a verifiable hypothesis.

Loving Vincent is the first feature film in which each image is composed of charcoal and oil paintings in van Gogh's style. It depicts Vincent van Gogh as an Other in the last months

of his life and after death. The film portrays van Gogh's isolation and loneliness in the village he moved to through a cold charcoal impressionist aesthetic. The aftermath of his death is described in a vivid, exciting and vibrant impasto post-impressionist style. Van Gogh's art recreates *Loving Vincent* and has the quality of raising questions about its reality in the minds of transnational audiences; he transcends geographical and intellectual boundaries by expressing himself in his paintings.

Various philosophers agree that a work of art can only be helpful to people if it reveals the truth or makes them think (for example, Jay, 1984; Platon, 2016). *Loving Vincent*, which has a biographical and detective structure, tries to reveal van Gogh's last days, some memories from his childhood and the events that happened after his death. The film questions the circumstances surrounding the genius painter's death, leaving the audience unsure whether he committed suicide or was murdered, and offers the audience the tragic pleasure of being informed or having question marks.

When examined according to neoformalist and philosophy of art approaches, *Loving Vincent* stands out by depicting mimesis, a narrative based on van Gogh's letters and paintings. The film, which sets out from his post-impressionist colour preference, refers to his state of mind. Additionally, off-screen music provides a sense of mourning and loneliness, guiding the audience to feel the artist more. In the narration, the filmmakers portray heterogeneous villagers who either hate or love the artist, standing beside van Gogh, who is portrayed as the excluded victim. However, the film leaves the audience with an uncertain hypothesis that can neither be verified nor falsified. *Loving Vincent* can serve society by evoking more emotions in an epistemological context, enabling the audience to empathise with marginalised people and act ethically towards them. Even if there is no verifiable hypothesis regarding van Gogh's death, such a viewing experience is valuable from an epistemological perspective. Van Gogh's post-impressionist paintings, the blending of charcoal impressionism with the features of digital cinema, and the transformation into animation are important advantages that strengthen the viewer's process of creating meaning.

In conclusion, *Loving Vincent* immerses the viewer in a unique intersection of art and science, highlighting significant sociological, psychological, and historical implications. Science, like art, cannot fully reveal or represent the truth due to the flexibility and changeability of knowledge over time. However, Films like *Loving Vincent* can help viewers understand the artistic and socio-cultural context. Unlike some experiences originating from the previous cultural atmosphere with the neo-formalist approach, producing emotional meaning and shocking quality is essential. *Loving Vincent* is an interdisciplinary film that transcends international boundaries. Van Gogh expresses himself in a new form through his paintings, producing meaning by merging cinema, painting, and music. In this way, the viewer can feel the heterogeneous emotions of a naive genius painter, such as joy, sadness and disappointment about being human. Seeing van Gogh's works for minutes is an advantage over moving images. However, technical features such as sound, editing, close-up, music and screen size are also important advantages that strengthen the viewer's perception. With this brand-new multisensory perception, the viewer can (re-)encode and decode the emotions and meanings of a tortured artist at the intersection of religion, madness and art.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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