

Lake Oswego Public Library World Cinema Series

Tuesday, April 29, 2025

5:30pm to 7:30pm

Lake Theater & Cafe

106 N State Street

Lake Oswego, OR 97034

An Introduction to *The Painter and the Thief* (2020)

My name is Courtney Hermann and I'm a professor of film at Portland State University, a documentary filmmaker, and co-author of the textbook *Directing the Documentary*. I'm glad to be here to introduce tonight's film, *The Painter and the Thief*, a Norwegian documentary released in 2020.

In recent years, you may have noticed an uptick in the availability of Norwegian films and television shows on American streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO Max. This trend reflects a broader global appetite for non-English-language content, accelerated by Netflix's 2016 expansion into 130 new countries. Strong support from the Norwegian Film Institute (NFI) has allowed filmmakers to prioritize quality over commercial pressures, helping cultivate Norway's reputation for high production values and distinctive storytelling. Recognizing the artistic strength and global appeal of these productions, platforms like Netflix and HBO Max now commission Norwegian originals directly.

The popularity of "Nordic Noir"—dark, slow-burning crime dramas—opened the door for Norwegian series like *Borderliner* and *Wisting*. Meanwhile, filmmakers have continued to build on a tradition of minimalistic, existential storytelling, blending realism with mythology in series like *Ragnarok* and films like *Thelma*. These productions offer compelling alternatives to Hollywood formulas, resonating with audiences seeking deeper, character-driven narratives, and showcasing Norway's ability to tell universally relevant stories while maintaining a uniquely Norwegian voice, rooted in emotional realism.

This ethos extends into Norwegian documentary filmmaking, which often focuses on small, personal stories that reflect larger social themes without didacticism. Filmmakers approach subjects with patience, sensitivity, and an openness to ambiguity; prioritizing dignity, complexity, and agency. Many celebrated Norwegian documentaries resist simple resolutions and foster empathy without romanticizing hardship.

The Painter and the Thief (2020), directed by Benjamin Ree, exemplifies these characteristics. Although it follows the unlikely friendship between the painter, Barbora, and the thief, Bertil, who stole her paintings, the film eschews conventional true crime narratives. Instead, Ree crafts a portrait of vulnerability, forgiveness, and redemption, employing naturalistic

cinematography, understated editing, and shifting perspectives—techniques that reflect both personal artistic choices and broader Norwegian documentary approaches.

Among Norwegian documentarians, Margreth Olin is perhaps the most celebrated, known for empathetic, socially engaged films such as *Nowhere Home* (on child asylum seekers) and *Childhood* (on early education and care). Aslaug Holm's *Brothers* (2015) embraces a patient, observational approach, following two siblings over several years in a style reminiscent of American filmmaker Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*. Ree's earlier film *Magnus* (2016), a character study of chess prodigy Magnus Carlsen, foretold his talent for intimate character-based storytelling.

These filmmakers thrive within a robust network of production companies committed to artistry and ethical storytelling. Sant & Usant, co-producer of *The Painter and the Thief*, specializes in personal, visually sophisticated nonfiction work that frequently premieres at major film festivals like Sundance, Berlin, and IDFA (Amsterdam).

Underlying this ecosystem is Norway's distinctive system of public film funding. The NFI offers grants for development, production, and international promotion, reflecting a national belief in film as a vital cultural art form. Unlike purely commercial models, NFI grants are awarded based on artistic ambition, narrative strength, and cultural relevance rather than box office potential.

Additional support comes from regional film centers, such as the Western Norway Film Centre and the North Norwegian Film Centre, which nurture emerging talent and regional storytelling. Broadcasters like NRK (the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) provide essential pre-sales and co-productions and international funding bodies such as the Nordic Film and TV Fund and Eurimages facilitate cross-border collaborations. This layered structure allows filmmakers to take creative risks, invest in long-term projects, and pursue subjects that might not guarantee commercial success but carry lasting cultural impact.

The Painter and the Thief illustrates the success of this model. Supported by Sant & Usant and funded by the NFI, Ree was able to spend years building trust with his subjects. His slow, immersive process produced a film marked by emotional complexity—a work unlikely to emerge from a purely market-driven system. Its naturalistic lighting, intimate handheld camerawork, and cool color grading align with Norwegian cinematic traditions, while its ethical storytelling honors the values at the heart of the nation's documentary practice.

Ultimately, *The Painter and the Thief* stands not just as a filmmaking triumph for Ree and his collaborators, but as a testament to Norway's commitment to public funding, ethical storytelling, and artistic risk-taking. Norway's model offers a compelling example of how sustained public investment can produce films that resonate far beyond national borders—and, with any luck, continue to stoke global audiences' appetite for profound, ethically made documentaries.

You are in for a cinematic treat tonight. The narrative complexity of *The Painter and the Thief* is remarkable. It asks us to watch differently—to stay aware of our own role as viewers, to notice how meaning is made moment-by-moment, and to track how the filmmaker’s hand quietly but insistently shapes our experience.

As you watch, consider: Are the narrators reliable? Is the director? And more broadly, how reliable are any of us when telling our stories?

Stay conscious of how the director draws you into the web of complex relationships between artist and subject, between filmmaker and filmed, between viewer and viewed. Notice how you make sense of the unfolding plot—questioning motives, unpacking points of view, and contemplating the inner lives of the participants and the way they resist easy categorization.

As the film progresses, watch how point of view evolves and how the balance of power shifts with it. First, an omniscient distance; then through the painter, Barbora’s eyes; and then, startlingly, through Bertil, the thief’s perspective. Each shift is not only structural but emotional, reframing earlier moments, exposing new vulnerabilities, and rebalancing the power dynamic.

Feel, too, how Bertil, the thief is doubly objectified—as the subject of Barbora’s paintings and by the filmmaker’s lens. Yet he craves this attention and affirmation. It’s uncomfortable at times, but you can also sense how the relationships with Barbora, and with the film itself, offer Bertil a kind of lifeline. In a very real sense, the thief becomes a muse for both the painter and the filmmaker. He seeks not just to be seen in his pain, but to be captured in his fuller humanity and, importantly, to live into a vision of himself beyond suffering.

Enjoy!

Works Cited

The Painter and the Thief. Directed by Benjamin Ree, Sant & Usant, 2020.

Norwegian Film Institute. “About the Norwegian Film Institute.” *Norwegian Film Institute*, <https://www.nfi.no/english>.

Sant & Usant. *Sant & Usant Official Website*, <https://santogusant.no/>.

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Margreth Olin. “Filmography.” *Speranza Film*, <https://www.speranza.no/>.

Ree, Benjamin, director. *The Painter and the Thief – Official Trailer*. YouTube, uploaded by NEON, 29 Apr. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bqei6fePZwc>.