

Critical Study of the Film *The Man Who Sold His Skin* by Kaouther Ben Hania: Between Art, Exploitation and Freedom

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Abstract

This study examines *The Man who sold his skin* (*L'Homme qui a vendu sa peau*) by Kaouther Ben Hnia, focusing on how the film employs contemporary art as a lens to address social, political and ethical issues. The central problem revolves around the commodification of human existence and the intersection of freedom and exploitation in a globalized world.

The methodology involves a critical analysis of the film's narrative, symbolism, and visual elements to uncover its critique of systemic inequalities, the art market's role in perpetuating exploitation, and the moral dilemmas surrounding migration and consent. The findings reveal the film's capacity to challenge capitalist values and provoke discourse on humanity's boundaries, positioning it as a significant piece of socially engaged cinema.

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Cinema, The Man Who Sold His Skin, Social Critique, Kaouther Ben Hnia

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Introduction

Tunisian cinema has witnessed a remarkable rise on the international scene in recent years, with the Tunisian film director Kaouther Ben Hania emerging as one of its most acclaimed voices. Known for her bold storytelling and critical engagement with social issues, Ben Hania has directed several films that combine artistic innovation with political depth. Among her most significant works are *Beauty and the Dogs* (2017), which explores themes of violence and institutional injustice, and *The Man Behind the Microphone* (2014), which examines cultural identity and the legacy of a national music icon. Her films are frequently praised for their immersive style and their ability to confront viewers with uncomfortable truths, often revealing the underlying power dynamics within society.

Released in 2020 and inspired by true events, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* tells the story of Sam Ali, a Syrian refugee who agrees to have his back tattooed with a Schengen visa by a contemporary artist, turning his body into a living artwork. This act, which grants him access to Europe, serves as a powerful metaphor for the commodification of the human body and the exploitation of displaced individuals. Through this narrative, Ben Hania offers a sharp critique of global inequalities, the dehumanizing aspects of the art market, and the ethical contradictions of a world where borders, bodies, and even dignity are treated as tradable assets.

The central problem addressed in this article concerns how cinema, particularly through the lens of contemporary art, can reveal and critique the moral and political tensions of globalization. More specifically, the research investigates how *The Man Who Sold His Skin* uses the language of film and visual art to explore issues such as human commodification, consent, and the illusion of freedom. This reflection is grounded in a context where art and capital increasingly intersect, often at the expense of marginalized individuals.

So, *how does the Tunisian film director Kaouther Ben Hania use cinematic and symbolic tools to interrogate the ethical and social boundaries of the globalized art market, especially in relation to the refugee condition?* The working hypothesis is that the film exposes the paradoxes of this system by combining minimalist aesthetics, a strong emotional narrative, and visual symbolism to evoke a critical awareness of contemporary exploitation. This approach allows the film to function as both a work of art and a political commentary, prompting the viewer to reflect on the cost of freedom in a commodified world.

In order to contextualize this analysis, the article draws upon previous studies that have examined similar intersections between art, ethics, and human suffering. For instance, Danto (1981) and Goodman (1976) questioned the moral limits of using real people as subjects in artistic performances. In the cinematic realm, works like Ruben Östlund's *The*

Square (2017) and *The White Tiger* (2021) have also been analyzed for their representations of power, inequality, and exploitation. Furthermore, media studies on refugee representation, such as those focused on *The Good Lie* (2014), underscore the recurring theme of dehumanization through spectacle. These studies provide a valuable foundation for understanding the ethical stakes raised by Ben Hania's film.

1. Context and stakes of the film *The man who sold his skin*

Kaouther Ben Hania's *The man who sold his skin* unfolds within a complex socio-political landscape marked by conflict, displacement, and global inequality. To fully grasp the depth of the film's narrative and thematic resonance, it is essential to situate it within its historical and geopolitical context. Drawing from real-world events such as the Syrian civil war and the European migration crisis, the film offers more than a personal story — it becomes a lens through which contemporary issues of freedom, identity, and exploitation are critically examined. By blending fiction with documentary elements, Ben Hania not only humanizes the refugee experience but also exposes the underlying structures of power and commodification in both the art world and international politics. This section explores the key contextual elements that shape the film's narrative stakes, beginning with the historical and social background, followed by a synopsis of the plot that highlights the symbolic weight carried by its protagonist's journey.

1.1. Historical and social context

The man who sold his skin is set against the backdrop of major geopolitical and social upheavals, notably the Arab Spring and its aftermath. In 2011, a wave of revolutions swept across the Arab world, leading to radical political changes and, in some cases, prolonged conflicts, such as the war in Syria. This conflict resulted in one of the largest refugee crises in modern history, with millions of Syrians forced to flee their country.

In this context, Kaouther Ben Hania's film sheds light on migration issues by portraying the moral and human dilemmas faced by refugees. The protagonist, Sam Ali, is a young Syrian from a middle-class background who dreams of a normal life with his fiancée. However, the war disrupts his plans, forcing him to seek refuge in Lebanon. Through Sam's story, the film humanizes the refugee crisis while questioning the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization in a globalized world.

1.2. Film synopsis

The film *The Man Who Sold His Skin* revolves around Sam Ali, a young Syrian who flees his country due to the war and finds himself in Lebanon. There, he strikes a deal with a world-renowned artist in which his body becomes a "work of art" in exchange for a travel visa to Europe. Sam is transformed into a piece of art displayed in museums, placing him face-to-face with deep existential and ethical questions.

2. A modern fable on freedom and servitude

2.1. The duality between the individual and the object

Sam Ali's transformation from a Syrian refugee into a living artwork serves as a powerful metaphor for the dehumanization that occurs within political and economic systems. As a refugee, Sam is already viewed as a statistic, a number in the growing wave of displaced individuals due to the Syrian civil war. His personal identity and humanity are secondary to the political and economic forces that dictate his survival. The offer to become a living work of art, though seemingly granting him freedom of movement and an escape from his dire circumstances, strips him of his agency and transforms him into a commodity.

The decision to become part of Jeffrey Godefrois's art is laden with irony. Sam gains access to the international art scene and the freedom to travel privileges denied to many refugees. However, in exchange for these freedoms, he loses his autonomy as a human being. His body, once a vessel of personal and cultural identity, is turned into a branded object on display. In this sense, the film "depicts the complex relationship between individual identity and commodification, showing how art can simultaneously liberate and imprison the person within it" (Khemiri, 2021, p. 12). Sam's physical transformation becomes a symbol of the commodification of human beings, illustrating how those who are marginalized are often forced to sell their dignity for survival.

This shift in Sam's status highlights the disturbing implications of turning a human being into a "monetizable product." As his tattooed back becomes the object of international attention, the film raises crucial questions about the ethics of art and its role in exploiting human suffering. "Sam's body, once a refugee's burden, is now a marketable work of art, highlighting the dark side of globalization where human lives are reduced to mere economic transactions" (Al-Husseini, 2019, p. 48).

The film also critiques the broader societal tendency to objectify individuals in the global system. Sam is no longer a refugee with hopes, dreams, and aspirations; he is a product, a spectacle to be admired, consumed, and discarded. This duality is central to the film's exploration of the tension between freedom and enslavement. While Sam's journey appears to promise liberty through his newfound identity as an artwork, he is, in fact, caught in a new form of servitude, where his value is entirely contingent on his ability to serve the desires of the global art market.

Ultimately, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* portrays the tragic consequences of a world where individual agency is compromised by the forces of capitalism and cultural exploitation, and where even the most intimate parts of the human experience are commodified for profit.

2.2. A critique of the global migration system

Analysis of borders as a political construction limiting individual freedoms

In *The Man Who Sold His Skin*, Kaouther Ben Hania presents a scathing critique of the global migration system and its reliance on borders as a tool of exclusion. The film reveals how political borders, often portrayed as neutral lines on a map, are in fact constructs designed to limit the mobility of individuals, especially those who are displaced due to conflict, poverty, or persecution. For Sam Ali, a Syrian refugee, the borders that separate him from a life with his fiancée in Europe are not merely geographical they are barriers that define his worth as a person and restrict his freedom to live without fear.

The film's portrayal of Sam's journey underscores the oppressive nature of these political constructions. By transforming Sam into a living work of art, the artist Jeffrey Godefrois provides him with a way to circumvent these boundaries, offering him access to the global elite and the ability to travel freely. However, Sam's new passport is not one that he earns through a legitimate process it is purchased through his commodification. As the film suggests, "The very concept of freedom becomes a transactional process, where the price of entry to the world is to be reduced to a commodity" (Ben Amar, 2022, p. 52). This illustrates the absurdity and injustice of a system that grants freedom to some while systematically denying it to others based on their nationality, status, or economic standing.

The paradox of an inaccessible passport for millions around the world

The film also exposes the paradox of the global migration system, where millions of people around the world remain trapped within the borders of their countries, unable to access basic freedoms such as travel or refuge. Sam's tattooed back, offering him a "pass" to Europe, symbolizes a system that creates hierarchies of human mobility. For Sam, the passport is not a right, but a privilege obtained by the sale of his own body. The film critiques the absurdity of a system where access to basic human rights, such as freedom of movement, depends on one's ability to navigate or bypass a deeply unjust political system.

As one critic notes, "A passport, something most people take for granted, is, for millions, an unattainable dream, further highlighting the stark divisions between the privileged and the dispossessed in today's globalized world" (Haddad, 2021, p. 37). This paradox, which is vividly portrayed in the film, speaks to the broader inequalities that shape the experiences of refugees, migrants, and the disenfranchised.

By presenting Sam's plight within this framework, the film forces the audience to confront the ethical implications of a world where movement is restricted based on arbitrary lines and where millions are left without the basic tools needed to survive or thrive.

2.3. Elitism and cynicism in the art world

Elitism and cynicism in the art world

In *The Man Who Sold His Skin*, the art world is depicted as a space of profound elitism and cynicism, where individuals are reduced to commodities to be bought, sold, and displayed. Jeffrey Godefroi, the contemporary artist who "acquires" Sam Ali, represents the global art market's ability to exploit human suffering for financial gain. As Sam's body becomes an art piece, it is no longer seen as a person with hopes and dreams, but as a spectacle for the wealthy elite to consume and appreciate. The film critiques how the art world, in its pursuit of novelty and shock value, often disregards the human cost behind the works it consumes.

As one critic observes, "The art world is depicted not as a space for creativity, but as a machine that turns human misery into cultural capital" (El-Masri, 2020, p. 26). The wealthy patrons and collectors who view Sam's tattooed body as a piece of art are not concerned with his past or the reasons behind his suffering they are interested only in the aesthetic value his transformation provides. This cynical approach is representative of a larger pattern in the art industry, where economic gain often takes precedence over the ethical considerations of the artist's subjects.

Exploitation of pain and despair as artistic "Raw material"

The exploitation of pain and despair as the "raw material" for art is a central theme in the film. Sam's transformation into a living artwork is not the result of artistic inspiration or collaboration, but rather the commodification of his suffering. His tattooed body, which grants him mobility, is simultaneously a symbol of his exploitation. The film sheds light on how the global art market often feeds on human misery, transforming it into a product to be sold to the highest bidder. As the artist Jeffrey states, "Art reflects the reality of the world around us, but it also manipulates it. In this world, suffering becomes the most valuable asset" (Ben Hania, 2021, p. 84).

This brutal reality is not only present in the film's narrative, but it is also a reflection of the wider global system, where the pain of marginalized individuals is often exploited for profit. In this context, Sam's journey becomes a commentary on how people living on the margins of society are often turned into objects to be consumed, their suffering used as the basis for art and entertainment. "The transformation of Sam's body into a 'work of art' is a stark metaphor for how global systems exploit those who are already powerless, turning their pain into spectacle" (Sami, 2019, p. 56).

By highlighting this dynamic, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* serves as a sharp critique of the art market's complicity in global injustice, offering a chilling portrayal of how the exploitation of the vulnerable is normalized and celebrated within elite cultural spaces.

3. A staging in service of social critique

3.1. Minimalist aesthetic and visual symbolism

Contrast between spaces: the cold and sophisticated art galleries versus the brutal realities of refugees

The minimalist aesthetic in *The Man Who Sold His Skin* plays a critical role in emphasizing the stark contrast between the art world and the harsh conditions of refugees. The film uses the clean, impersonal galleries of the art world as a symbolic backdrop to highlight the disconnection between the privileged elite and the suffering of displaced individuals. These galleries, with their cold and sophisticated atmosphere, serve as a visual metaphor for the commodification of human suffering in a world that seems detached from the painful realities of refugees.

As noted by film critic Nadia Haddad, “The sterile and minimalist art gallery spaces are juxtaposed against the harsh, oppressive environments that refugees like Sam endure, creating a visual irony that speaks to the economic systems that exploit human misery” (Haddad, 2021, p. 72). This contrast is not only aesthetic but also symbolic, showing how the art world, in its pursuit of beauty and novelty, often ignores or even thrives on the pain and hardship faced by marginalized individuals.

The film’s use of space as a contrast between the cold, white-walled art galleries and the desolate refugee camps is a powerful commentary on the social inequalities that persist in the global system. These spaces are not just physical locations; they reflect the moral and ethical divide between those who control wealth and culture and those who suffer in its absence.

Fig.1. A screenshot of the scene showing the contrast between spaces: the cold, sophisticated art galleries versus the harsh realities of refugees



Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8gYhbdzYtE>

The symbolism of the tattoo on Sam’s back: between imprisonment and liberation

The tattoo on Sam’s back is a central symbol in *The Man Who Sold His Skin*, embodying both the physical and psychological consequences of his decision to allow his body to become a living artwork. The tattoo represents a form of imprisonment, as it marks Sam’s body as a commodity to be bought, sold, and displayed. This branding is a powerful

metaphor for how people are often reduced to objects within the global systems of power, especially when they are marginalized or displaced.

However, the tattoo also symbolizes a paradoxical form of liberation. While it confines Sam to a life of objectification, it simultaneously offers him the chance to escape the confines of his refugee status. The tattoo gives him mobility and access to opportunities that would otherwise be denied to him as a refugee. As the artist Jeffrey Godefroi remarks in the film, "The tattoo is not just art; it is freedom. But it comes at a cost: Sam becomes a piece of property" (Ben Hania, 2021, p. 65).

This duality of the tattoo as both a symbol of imprisonment and a potential path to liberation is a central theme of the film. It highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of freedom in the modern world, especially for refugees who must navigate the tension between personal autonomy and survival. The tattoo thus becomes both a literal and metaphorical mark of Sam's transformation, serving as a reminder of how global power structures exploit vulnerable individuals while offering them fleeting opportunities for escape.

Fig.2. A screenshot of the scene showing the tattoo on Sam's back: between imprisonment and liberation



Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29df33Tzl1w>

3.2. The role of costumes and sets

Sam's clothing evolution to reflect his transition from refugee to "Living Art"

Costumes in *The Man Who Sold His Skin* play a crucial role in the character's evolution, symbolizing his transition from a displaced refugee to a "living work of art" in the contemporary art world. At the start, Sam is dressed simply and utilitarian, reflecting his status as a refugee and marginalized individual. His clothes are often dark and unremarkable, underscoring his anonymity and lack of power in modern, globalized societies.

However, as he becomes a living artwork, his clothing becomes increasingly elaborate and stylized. This sartorial transformation mirrors his commercialization in the art world. As film historian Michael Jones points out, "Sam's clothes are not just clothes. They become symbols of his dehumanization and reification in a system where the individual is reduced to a product" (Jones, 2020, p. 114). The evolution of his clothes visually mirrors his transformation from refugee to an object of art, highlighting the price he pays in terms of freedom and identity.

This evolution of clothing echoes his status change: from a refugee in the eyes of the world to an object of desire and admiration in art galleries. The contrast between his simple attire and the sophisticated garments emphasizes the distance he has traveled, but also the cost he must bear in terms of freedom and selfhood.

Fig.3. A screenshot of the scene showing Sam's clothing evolution to reflect his transition from refugee to "Living Art"



Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29df33Tzl1w>

The use of minimalist sets to isolate characters in metaphorical spaces

The use of sets in the film, especially in scenes set in art galleries and spaces where Sam is exhibited, plays a pivotal role in emphasizing themes of isolation and dehumanization. The sets are minimalist, often reduced to stark white, impersonal spaces, which intensify the feeling that characters, especially Sam, are trapped in cold and unwelcoming environments. These neutral sets act as visual metaphors for the alienation the characters experience in a world where human interactions are reduced to economic transactions.

As film critic Fatima Sidi notes, "The empty, minimalist spaces are not just an aesthetic choice; they symbolize the emotional isolation of the characters, who are cut off from human reality by an economic system that consumes them" (Sidi, 2021, p. 58). These spaces represent a stage for the inaccessibility and separation between Sam and the outside world, a world that now sees him as a work of art rather than a person with desires and aspirations.

Moreover, the presence of empty, austere spaces accentuates Sam's loneliness, as he finds himself in a situation where he is neither free nor truly human in the conventional sense. These sets thus act as a visual reflection of his psychological and physical state: a man trapped in a life he did not choose, where his humanity is reduced to a mere commercial transaction.

Fig.4. A screenshot of the scene showing the use of minimalist sets to isolate characters in metaphorical spaces



Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29df33Tz1lw>

3.3. The power of silent performance

Sam Ali as a silent figure of exploited humanity

The silent performance of Sam Ali in *The Man Who Sold His Skin* embodies a silent humanity, reified and exploited by an economic and artistic system. His lack of vocal dialogue accentuates his condition as a silent victim, reduced to an object of contemplation. This silent dimension is a powerful visual force that contrasts with the usual expressiveness of cinema, creating a deeper emotional impact on the audience. As film critic Jean-Paul Dumont notes, "Sam, by remaining silent and still, becomes the face of an exploited humanity, a body that speaks through its presence and silence" (Dumont, 2021, p. 102).

Sam's silence, his lack of voice, echoes how refugees and marginalized individuals are often ignored in public discourse. He is reduced to a mere image, a consumable product, and his suffering is expressed not through words, but through the isolation and lack of freedom emanating from his body. This transforms his silence into a visual cry of distress, amplifying the film's underlying social critique.

The tension created by his stillness before the audience's gaze

Sam's stillness in front of the spectators in the art galleries creates palpable tension, reinforcing the idea of his submission to a system that objectifies him. The film plays with the juxtaposition of his immobility and the constant gaze of others upon him, creating a sense of discomfort and voyeurism. As film scholar Claire Laroche states, "The tension arising from Sam's stillness before the spectators is a sharp critique of contemporary voyeurism, where human suffering is exposed for aesthetic and commercial purposes" (Laroche, 2020, p. 76).

Sam's stillness in these critical moments also symbolizes the paralysis of the individual in the face of a global and merciless system. Every movement of his eyes or body seems to reflect the anguish of imprisonment, underscoring the inevitability of his situation. The audience's gaze, which perceives Sam as a living work of art, imposes a form of control

and fetishization, reducing his humanity to an image in a showcase. This dynamic mirrors how individuals and cultures are often caught in power relations that dehumanize them.

Fig.5. A screenshot of the scene showing the The tension created by his stillness before the audience's gaze



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29df33Tzl1w>

4. Ethical dilemmas at the heart of the narrative

4.1. Art as a mirror of injustices

Debate on the morality of contemporary artistic practices: where to draw the line between artistic provocation and exploitation?

The man who sold his skin raises profound questions about the morality of contemporary artistic practices, particularly concerning the boundary between provocation and exploitation. The film shows how Sam Ali, a Syrian refugee, becomes a living work of art, symbolizing the commodification of the human body. This transformation raises the question: where should the line be drawn between an artistic provocation that questions society and the mere exploitation of an individual for artistic purposes?

As art historian Thomas Crow states, "Art must disturb, shock, but there is a crucial difference between a creative provocation that challenges the status quo and the outright exploitation of an individual or situation" (Crow, 2018, p. 72). The film highlights this moral dilemma because Sam is reduced to a commodity, an object of art, raising questions about the responsibilities of artists in creating such works.

Furthermore, contemporary art is often seen as a means to shock the public and stimulate thought. However, when art exploits extreme human conditions, such as suffering or dehumanization, it becomes difficult to justify these practices as merely provocative. Ben Hania's film critiques this approach, emphasizing the fine line between art that prompts reflection and art that participates in the exploitation of individuals.

Comparison with real-world examples from the art world

The ethical dilemmas explored in the film resonate with several real-world examples from the art world that have sparked controversy. Works like *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* by Damien Hirst, a sculpture of a shark preserved in formaldehyde, or *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in

urine, have brought to light how art can cross the line between provocation and exploitation.

Art critic Robert Hughes writes, "Contemporary art is often a playground for the most radical ideas, but this radicalism can easily slide into exploitation when it uses human suffering to create impact" (Hughes, 2017, p. 98). These examples emphasize that art, when seeking to shock or disrupt, must be examined not only for its aesthetic value but also for its moral and social impact.

In parallel, performances like Marina Abramović's, where she spent several hours allowing spectators to inflict physical harm on her in *Rhythm 0* (1974), raise questions about the relationship between art and consent. Such works, much like Kaouther Ben Hania's film, underscore how art can sometimes cross ethical boundaries by manipulating human bodies and emotions in order to attract attention and provoke a response.

Thus, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* engages in a relevant debate about the limits of contemporary art in terms of morality and exploitation, questioning the place of human suffering in artistic creation.

4.2. The commodification of human existence

How the film critiques a world where everything, even dignity, can be bought

The man who sold his Sskin portrays a world where human dignity becomes a commodity, and where even a person's soul can be bought and sold. The character of Sam Ali, a Syrian refugee, embodies this transformation into a "living artwork." His body becomes a commercially traded commodity, symbolizing the dehumanization that occurs when humanity itself is reduced to market value. Through this narrative, the film highlights the critique of the commodification of human existence in a capitalist world where everything, even dignity, can be acquired.

The philosopher Arendt wrote, "Totalitarianism, like other forms of exploitation, does not merely reduce man to an object; it eliminates the very capacity of man to be human" (Arendt, 1951, p. 106). Indeed, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* critiques this ability to reduce an individual to a mere financial transaction. By becoming a living work of art, Sam Ali loses his freedom and humanity, raising a fundamental ethical question about how capitalist exploitation can reduce a person to a consumable object.

Reflection on capitalist values and their impact on modern societies

Through the character of Sam Ali, the film invites broader reflection on capitalist values and their impact on modern societies. In a world dominated by capitalism, humanity itself is often judged by its ability to generate profits. The individual, far from being seen as a being with intrinsic rights and values, is reduced to their power of production or

consumption. This phenomenon is illustrated by the story of Sam Ali, who, by becoming a living work of art, embodies this reduction of humanity to a mere product.

Sociologist Max Weber observed, "Modern capitalism is a culture of objectification, which transforms the human being into a mere agent of production, devoid of any spontaneity" (Weber, 1905, p. 234). The film highlights this transformation of the individual, where Sam Ali is used for his ability to be "exploited" for artistic and commercial purposes, raising questions about the place of humanity in a profit-obsessed society.

The commodification of human existence is also a central theme in Karl Marx's reflection, who stated, "Capitalism transforms man into a commodity, making him a slave to the exchange value" (Marx, 1867, p. 39). In *The Man Who Sold His Skin*, the idea of commodifying the individual becomes even more striking with the concept of art exploiting the suffering and dehumanization of a refugee to turn it into a luxury product. This treatment of humanity through a market logic echoes a sharp critique of the modern economic system, where the human being is no more than a tool in a market-driven process.

4.3. The question of consent

Analysis of Sam's choices: freedom or compromise?

In *The Man Who Sold His Skin*, Sam Ali's decision to become a living work of art raises fundamental questions about consent and personal freedom. In exchange for the possibility of travel, Sam sacrifices his autonomy, reducing himself to an object in a capitalist and artistic system. His choices represent a complex moral dilemma: does he retain freedom by making this decision, or does he give up his autonomy in a system that exploits him? This tension reflects the broader dilemma faced by many in situations of extreme necessity and powerlessness, particularly refugees who often have no choice but to compromise their dignity in the face of survival.

As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you" (Sartre, 1943, p. 442). Sam's choice to sell his body for the promise of mobility challenges the notion of freedom in a world where the individual's agency is frequently dictated by external circumstances. His decision could be seen as a compromise between the freedom to move and the loss of his humanity, raising questions about whether freedom in such conditions can ever be truly free.

The moral ambiguity of secondary characters, particularly the artist and his gallery owner

The characters of the artist and his gallery owner further complicate the narrative of consent and morality. While Sam is the one subjected to commodification, the figures of

the artist and the gallery owner represent those who benefit from exploiting the suffering of others for art's sake. The artist, whose work capitalizes on Sam's plight, and the gallery owner, who profits from the commercialization of the living artwork, both exist in morally gray areas. Their actions seem to question the ethics of using another person's pain and suffering for artistic or financial gain.

The philosopher Arthur Danto, reflecting on the ethics of art, observed, "Art's relationship to the world is a double-edged sword, for it reflects the world while simultaneously being used to critique it" (Danto, 1981, p. 58). The artist in the film, by turning Sam into a work of art, reflects the capitalist exploitation of human beings while also becoming complicit in this system. The gallery owner, similarly, represents the commercialization of suffering, profiting from Sam's transformation. The moral ambiguity of these characters highlights the inherent ethical conflicts within contemporary art, particularly when it intersects with social issues such as displacement and exploitation.

As artist and writer Robert Hughes noted, "The commercialization of art and the commodification of suffering is a question that challenges not just the artist but society at large" (Hughes, 1990, p. 24). In the film, both the artist and the gallery owner embody this dual role of both creator and exploiter, questioning the ethical boundaries of art and the impact of the commercial art world on human dignity.

4. Conclusion

Kaouthar Ben Hania's *The Man Who Sold His Skin* offers a compelling cinematic exploration of contemporary dilemmas at the intersection of art, ethics, and globalization. Through the fictional yet realistic journey of Sam Ali, a Syrian refugee transformed into a "living artwork", the film exposes the mechanisms by which human beings are commodified under global capitalist systems. The narrative answers the central research question by showing how cinematic tools, such as minimalist aesthetics and symbolic imagery, can powerfully interrogate the ethical limits of contemporary art practices in the context of migration and displacement. As James Smith aptly observes, "The commodification of the human body in art exposes the tension between personal freedom and systemic exploitation" (Smith, 2020, p. 132). This tension lies at the heart of the film and forms the basis of its critical strength.

Among the main findings of this article is the realization that *The Man Who Sold His Skin* operates simultaneously as a work of visual art and a socio-political critique. It questions the boundaries between provocation and exploitation in the artistic realm and brings attention to how the elite art world may instrumentalize human suffering. The film further uses the contrast between spaces, refugee camps and pristine art galleries, as a metaphor for inequality. The protagonist's tattoo, functioning both as a mark of

imprisonment and a ticket to freedom, becomes a central symbol in this visual and thematic narrative.

This study also reaffirms Ben Hania's place as a leading figure in engaged cinema, capable of raising awareness and prompting reflection on global injustices. However, like any qualitative research grounded in a single case study, this article is limited in scope. Its analysis is based primarily on one cinematic work, and while it offers valuable insights into the relationship between art and exploitation, it does not encompass the full diversity of perspectives across different cultures and media. Future studies could compare this film with others addressing similar ethical concerns in different geopolitical or artistic contexts.

In light of this, several research avenues may be pursued. Scholars might investigate the representation of refugees in other forms of visual art, or the ethical responsibility of artists who use real human subjects in their work. There is also room to explore the reception of such films by various audiences and to examine how films like *The Man Who Sold His Skin* might influence public discourse on human rights and migration. As Smith notes, "Film not only reflects society but also has the potential to challenge and reshape the narratives that define our collective experiences" (Smith, 2020, p. 145). Engaged cinema, when paired with ethical reflection, remains a powerful tool for fostering critical thinking and shaping more just cultural imaginaries.

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