

FILM REVIEW

Big Eyes

Written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, directed by Tim Burton, 2014, The Weinstein Company, Silverwood Films, and Tim Burton Productions (New York and West Hollywood, 106 minutes, rated PG-13)

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Abstract This is a review of the film *Big Eyes*. Adapted from a true story about artist Margaret Keane, the overarching theme of the movie is plagiarism. While most people think of written works such as books and articles being plagiarized, *Big Eyes* gives viewers insight into the world of stolen works of visual art, namely paintings. The victim finds moral courage through religion, while the thief (Keane's husband, Walter) lives in denial until death. Anyone with an interest in art, law, or psychiatry will enjoy what *Big Eyes* has to offer.

Keywords Plagiarism · Professionalism · Art · Law · Alcoholism · Religion

I was attracted to the film *Big Eyes* because of its theme: plagiarism. I teach authorship ethics at an Australian medical school, and it seems no matter how much effort I put into this topic, almost yearly an allegation of plagiarism arises. I thought, perhaps, the film might offer me something extra to add to my curriculum. Indeed, it did.

The setting for *Big Eyes* is San Francisco. Having lived there myself, I am familiar with the artwork at the centre of the movie—American artist Margaret Keane's images of children with overly large, dark eyes, somewhat reminiscent of a science fiction genre. These



images are very common worldwide on canvas, calendars, and gift cards, for example. In the film, Margaret (played by Amy Adams) is portrayed as a naïve woman, newly divorced and trying to raise a daughter as a single parent and a struggling artist. Quickly, she is seduced by Walter Keane (Christoph Waltz), a wannabe artist who is hiding his entire past from her and everyone else. Viewers will note that Walter's canvas is always blank—there is a reason for that!

According to the film, Walter and Margaret need each other, but each has very different reasons. Margaret is searching for security while Walter is searching for validation. The problem for Walter is that what he is seeking to validate does not actually exist—he is not and never will

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be a painter. Margaret, on the other hand, is a skilled painter; thus, Walter hijacks her talent by marketing her work as his own. *Is he delusional? A narcissist? A sociopath?* His “issues” are worth deep study; however, only a psychiatrist could offer an educated opinion.

Initially shocked and appalled, “Methodist Margaret” is blindsided by the hijacking of her work, but she is in a vulnerable position and caves in to Walter’s manipulative justification for the plagiarism. Feeling the comfort of a relationship and the financial profits due to the art sales, she sits back and rides the plagiarism train. But as the weeks, months, and years go by, the twitch of Margaret’s moral compass becomes more pronounced, causing her to resent Walter and even herself for her complicit behaviour. The plagiarism train rides on rocky rails, and life aboard is laced with cigarettes, alcohol, fire-setting, and even death threats.

When does Margaret finally draw the line with Walter? Her ethical breaking point is visible when two proselytizing visitors arrive at her door. Captivated by their reading material, Margaret finds her moral courage to fight back. While Margaret is generally depicted as weak, timid, and crushable during much of the film, it is refreshing that her role does not take her to feeling sorry for Walter. Ultimately, her feelings are focused where

they should be: on herself, her talent, her personal integrity. Inside, she has core values that had been deposited there as a child. Suppressing these values as an adult causes her extreme pain and hardship. Rekindling these values helps to lift her from oppression and give her new-found self-esteem and security.

Big Eyes is a great film with many teaching moments. Anyone with an interest in art, law, or psychiatry will enjoy what *Big Eyes* has to offer. Additionally, it’s a good addition to the curriculum toolbox of academics who teach authorship ethics. One of the reasons for this is that it is a profound reminder that plagiarism occurs in various facets of creative work, not just books and journal articles. Furthermore, it supports the value of the arts and their creators—their works are due ethical and legal protection just as works of scientific research have long been deemed to have.

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