

Exit Through the Gift Shop . . . and Buy Something!

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Exit Through the Gift Shop is a documentary about the rise and exploitation of the street art genre directed by the elusive street artist, known as Banksy. The film acts as graffiti of the documentary genre by showing the worlds of art and film criticism as susceptible to manipulation. Banksy accomplishes in *Exit* by showing how the aura of art and the artist becomes exploited for monetary gain, while maintaining his own aura. In the process of deconstructing street art's rise to the public's consciousness, *Exit* questions three concepts of reality: the question of what is "really" art, the authenticity of creative expression, and finally, the notion of film's relationship to reality. Classical art and film theory from Walter Benjamin addresses the relationship between art and reality, helping deconstruct what makes the film such a strong commentary on the nature of art. The film creates a dichotomy of aura by revealing how street art became monetized while simultaneously cashing in on the phenomenon. Here we see in *Exit* a catch-22 that cannot be overlooked as a possible Banksy stunt on the art world and documentarians alike. Viewing the film through the lens of Benjaminian theory from *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* makes deconstructing the anti-establishment message of this multi-faceted film much clearer.

Before delving into the complex conversation of art that is *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, I must establish some parameters. First, the concept of *aura* as defined by Walter Benjamin is related directly to how art appeals to viewers, and his essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* deals with how the concepts of art change with the introduction of mechanical means of reproducing the art. Therefore, we can take *aura* to represent the appeal that art has for its viewers as based on the distance between the viewer and the work of art. More simply, art is defined as art due to its individuality and recognition as such, but these notions are called to question in *Exit* when artists are removed from the creation process and rely on mechanical means of production to produce works purely for financial gain. *Exit* deals with mechanical reproduction through photographic, filmic, and digital media in conversation with the legitimization and commoditizing of graffiti art, and Benjamin's framework is important to acknowledge in deconstructing the film's impact on the art and film community. Second, Banksy is perhaps best defined as an invisible icon of political street art whose works have garnered a large underground following prior to this film. However, he has never been revealed to the public consciousness. He remains instead invisible, only appearing in *Exit* as a darkly silhouetted figure with a digitally altered voice. In this way he maintains his *aura*, but we can have no concrete understanding of Banksy. We do not know whether or not the figure depicted in the film is really Banksy, or even if Banksy is a person or a community of artists who fall under one name. This background is crucial to evaluating the film.

What makes this documentary unique and appealing is the focus on the underground world of "street art" and the artists that produce brilliantly creative works of graffiti. This new art genre, which has only recently gained notoriety due to the viral explosion of Banksy's work on the Internet, signifies the divergence of art theory and defines the present state of art in the age of digital reproduction. Prior to the interest in photographing and preserving the works, the pieces were destroyed or covered up due to their nature as graffiti, but these modern mechanical processes allow the works to remain. The Internet is the ultimate manifestation of what Paul Valery prophesized: "we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand" (Cited by Benjamin, 573). In this way, mechanical reproduction allows graffiti to become circulated as mainstream, and, a consumer phenomenon,

but on a deeper level we must understand that *Exit* participates directly in this consumerism phenomena.

Exit is the first film of its kind because it takes street art from the underground and brings it to the masses on a scale that stumbling upon it online would not accomplish. Christian Metz identified this unique characteristic of film, for it is a medium that inherently commands attention. Film is more of a mass medium than photography. He states: “the reason why cinema can bridge the gap between true art and the general public... is that films have an appeal of a presence and of a proximity that strikes the masses and fills the movie theater” (266). Without the help of film, street art would not have become a box office success, and most likely the majority of people who contributed to its earnings of over \$5 million would still never know who Banksy is, since he is an artist who remains invisible in the public eye, never to reveal his identity or promote his work. But what is the effect of this mass appeal? What is the motivation behind the making of the film?

Herein lies the first question *Exit* poses, “What is art?” This is the crux that is perhaps the most obvious motive of the film, and the film addresses this question in a multitude of layers that expands the idea of what art is. First, the film deals with the notion of graffiti as art by highlighting the few street artists who have gained some notoriety. We get to know the artists on Tierra Guetta’s journey to meet Banksy, and become familiar with their different motivations, styles, and techniques. This first person approach to the storytelling allows viewers to see the art for themselves and understand it as such because we see the differing techniques of the individual through their whole creative process. This gives the works credibility that one not familiar with the genera may have previously discounted as vandalism.

The second layer of the question of art that this film deals with is Banksy’s art specifically, or for that matter, the nature and significance of street art. Banksy’s art seems to have strong anti-governmental, ant-establishment bent. Some common motifs in his work include children (as a metaphor for innocence), rats (which can be seen as representative of the dirge of urban living or the “crowd”) and recognizable images of power such as guns, police, or The Queen. The combination of these characteristics and his uncanny ability to place them in specific areas that juxtapose the work makes for powerful and iconic murals that call to question the status of the individual within the city and the danger of centralized power. Perhaps his works on the Israeli West Bank barrier illustrate his point that “A wall is a very big weapon. It’s one of the nastiest things you can hit someone with” (Banksy, *Banging Your Head Against a Brick Wall*). Banksy’s civic criticism does not stop with spray painting and stencils. Examples such as the “axed telephone booth” or the “Guantanamo Prisoner Disneyland” stunt are bold statements on the wrongness of governmental decisions and the exploitation of culture. Through his juxtaposing of images of innocence and violence within the cityscape, he represents a conscience to political, mainstream thought, and his shrouded identity only works to perpetuate this aura. This is only significant for filmic criticism because I believe this mindset contributes to the overall effect of the film, that is, to question the legitimacy of art through toying the trusted medium of documentary. What is absurd, though, (and perhaps the genius of this film) is how *Exit* destroys the concept of art after building it up, and this poses the second question the film asks of audiences: the question of the authenticity of art’s creation. This is accomplished by exploring the motives and means behind the art of Banksy’s incarnation, Mr. Brainwash.

After establishing street art as a legitimate genre that reflects the socio-political climate, *Exit* calls into question the legitimacy of art through our following of Mr. Brainwash, AKA MBW. As Benjamin would say: “work[s] of art reproduced becomes work[s] of art designed for reproducibility” (Benjamin, 576), the very man who viewers are led to believe is a filmmaker

essentially becomes a forger of the artists he watched for so long, and to much monetary success. This is the great prank the film seems to pull on audiences. Again, the first-person journey through the film proves important because we get to see how the life of a man progresses as the film progresses, for indeed, this is not a film about Banksy, but a film about the rise of the man infatuated with Banksy: Mr. Brainwash. Mr. Brainwash, or MBW, is French “filmmaker” Thierry Guetta, and is also the man responsible for the majority of footage we see in the film, but after Banksy established that Guetta had no intention of producing a “real” documentary (one that shows the history of street art authentically), Guetta is hugely discounted to viewers as a film artist. The viewer feels tricked for thinking that this man was a legitimate filmmaker and that we were watching the product of his artistry. Guetta has no ability to string a workable storyline out of his purely mechanical capturing of events. Simply recording reality like a mobile surveillance camera, his work falls outside the Arnheim’s concept of film as art. Banksy took Guetta’s pure mechanical reproduction and made it into a filmic work of art that paints the picture of the artist and the growth of the art form. Guetta becomes to viewers a character whose interest in street art borders on mindless obsession. It gets worse, for when he is urged to instead create his own works, he does so in the only way he knows how; by copying the techniques and style of those artists he had watched for years. But, his namesake “Mr. Brainwash” is the only thing that keeps viewers from completely discounting his work as forgery; it hints at a deeper connection and motivation to art’s creation directed by Banksy himself, possibly even a hoax on the art and film world.

Mr. Brainwash says he gets his name from art, the fact that “art is brainwash, the whole concept of what is legitimate art is brainwash” (MBW, *Exit*). In fact, this seems to tie in with Banksy’s anti-institution ideology. With his new namesake, Guetta emulates the techniques he learned from Shepard Fairey and Banksy to create posters and stencils to paste across the city, but he seems to have no authentic knack for it. From watching these street artists for years, he learned the techniques of application and printing that built their street credibility, and he applied them to his own work, eventually opening his own studio to produce the art full time. This would seem like a noble endeavor, except for the fact that his motivation stems not from his own creative drive, but from the urging of Banksy and the interest in showcasing the work for monetary exploitation. Furthermore, unlike the stencils we see Banksy making himself, MBW’s art revolves around “scanning and Photo Shopping,” and putting images together in Banksy-esque fashion. He never does any of the handy-work himself. He exploits the “quality of the presence of the original always depicted” (Benjamin, 577) a strong example being his “Elvis with an M16.” His staff of computer experts execute his vague ideas that he pulls from a Pop Art book, and once he has the template saved he can produce any number of his works in any variation of color he wants. He creates art without even touching it, but does his work still have the aura of the original? “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space,” (Benjamin, 573) and this fact seems to be the heart of MBW’s role by filling the consumer need that Banksy cannot accomplish. His motivation to put on his own art show presses his friends in the small community, imploring Banksy and Shepard Fairey specifically (the two biggest names in the underground scene) to endorse him through online forums and trendy LA culture magazine publications. Finally, in order to make good on his promise of a one of a kind MBW work to the first 200 people at his show, he splatters and dribbles paint on 200 identical prints in the expressionist style, which is literally the only direct hand he has at customizing his prints.

But at what point is the distinction between copying and creating made? For Mr. Brainwash, his work revolves around copying the different techniques of the artists he followed. Through this telling of the story, it is as if MBW has become the embodiment of what Banksy creates art against: the monetization and the mainstream ideology of institution. Mr. Brainwash

becomes the first street artist to exploit the genre and himself as an artist. He commoditizes graffiti art, essentially allowing consumers to buy a piece of work like Banksy's which Banksy himself would never sell due to his invisible nature. Instead of remaining aloof like Banksy, he sells his work for exorbitant prices and becomes wealthy, essentially becoming the poster child for the street-art connection and the conduit through which art dealers can buy from. This dichotomy between the artist who creates out of the interest of money by openly taking the artistic techniques from his friends (MBW) and the originator of social commentary graffiti (Banksy), is significant because it again calls to question the concept of the uniqueness of art. Benjamin says the uniqueness of work is inseparable from the work's traditional uses... uses which can change. Perhaps by replicating technique and making the art available to the masses, MBW is doing exactly that. Or, perhaps by exploiting on the aura created by Banksy he is simply capitalizing on the Cult of Exhibition as stated by Benjamin. At this point in *Exit*, all we know is this MBW seems to represent the anti-art; the antithesis of Banksy, who with his broad aura and invisible persona represents anti-mainstream thought. This is the dichotomy begs on the third question and the ultimate goal of this paper: since MBW spawned from Banksy's encouragement and since this film is supposedly directed by Banksy, is the film a realistic representation of MBW and of events as they transpired as we see in *Exit*? In other words, Is it a *true* documentary or another "Banksy stunt"?

This facet brings us full circle and to the final question of the film: the authenticity of the film as an accurate representation of these occurrences. Here, Rudolf Arnheim's two authenticities of filmic representation prove helpful in disassembling the perplexing motive of this film. First, does the film "do justice to the facts of reality?" and second, does the film "express the qualities of human experience?" (Arnheim 538). The first question can never be answered clearly in *Exit*, which is the allure of both the film and also of Banksy himself. For the purposes of this paper, aura is the perceived distance between the artist/work and the viewer. Banksy maintains his aura by never letting us see his face. Through techniques outlined by Arnheim in *Film as Reality*, Banksy maintains his own aura while portraying himself as a passive interviewee. Banksy effectively preserves his identity and aura by keeping only his hands well lit, and this is really the only expression we get from him. While these effects, combined with Banksy's careful direction and editing, establish the film as "art" worthy of analysis, we never learn who Banksy is, therefore, we have no real idea if what he accomplished with his art is actually even his. We cannot even know for certain to what extent he directed the film, since he depicts himself as a passive onlooker in his interviews. We therefore have no concrete idea of how much Banksy's influence dictated the creation and success of Mr. Brainwash. Is it possible they are one in the same? Mr. Brainwash becomes, essentially, the face of Banksy, but also the antithesis of everything he stands for. One cannot help but think, "This is a Banksy film. Banksy is known for works that juxtapose the common concepts of art and mass thought. Perhaps this is a stunt, a hoax of the documentary genre to the same end," and it would seem that this is the film's intention. Banksy has been known to pull stunts before to give his art legitimacy, an example being when he placed one of his works on the walls in the Tate Museum. Is MBW just a melting pot for all things modern and pop culture, and a way to monetize the trend without destroying the aura and credibility Banksy created for himself? This cannot be answered because the film does not reveal who the artist Banksy really is.

Merriam-Webster defines graffiti as "writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place," but Banksy's *Exit through the Gift Shop* challenges this seemingly closed-minded definition. By addressing the question of what constitutes art, the concept of authenticity, and the relation of film to reality, *Exit* becomes a multi-dimensional look at where art is going whilst poking fun at the confines of art and political thought. Banksy challenges viewers to evaluate how they interpret common notions of

community, politics and art with this film much the same way his original works in the streets of London did. Is *Exit* a hoax designed to spread this message and source this introspective dialogue within viewers? Possibly. If so, Banksy essentially created the greatest work of filmic graffiti over the most prestigious establishment of filmic art: The Oscars. By garnering a nomination, whilst maintaining his ambiguity and aura, he's monetizing his craft on a scale much larger than MBW ever achieved. The only problem with the finale of the hoax was, who would accept the golden statue?