

Review:

Banksy (Director). *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. (Paranoid Pictures 2010)

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A lone elephant, awash in red paint and stenciled with gold fleur-de-lis, lumbers through the loading deck of a warehouse on Skid Row in L.A. She matches the wallpaper background of a freestanding living room, designed to be the centerpiece of an art exhibition by newly-minted street artist Mr. Brainwash (MBW). The impressive, gentle animal is meant to symbolize the proverbial “elephant in the room,” but the joke seems to be on hip Hollywood attendees and Los Angeles press, who don’t realize they *are* the elephant. Through the extensive use of irony, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) provokes questions of authenticity and voice in the street art movement—an underground, secretive counterculture that has gone mainstream. The documentary is meant to identify questions and ignite dialogue about free expression, the ownership of public space and definitions of public art. In combination with texts such as Daphne Spain’s *Gendered Spaces*, the documentary

provides a wealth of discussion and assignment topics from which to create conditions for engaged pedagogy in a first-year or upper-level composition classroom.

The documentary introduces us to Los Angeles vintage clothing shop owner Thierry Guetta, who becomes both subject of *Exit* and the director of his own documentary. Guetta obsessively records his family's daily life and follows street artists in a way that makes the viewer (and the other speakers in the documentary) question his sanity and integrity. He explains the root of the obsession lies in his family's decision to never mention his mother's terminal illness until her death. In turn, he tries to capture all waking moments because they will never happen the same way again. It is a strange balance of curated and uncontrolled – private and public displays of messages that director Banksy critiques in *Exit*. This kairotic notion helps Banksy identify the impermanent temporal context of street art that continues to permeate the dialogue of artists in the film (and a productive opportunity for composition students to consider the temporal nature of their own writing).

Early in the documentary, we are introduced to Guetta's street art inspiration – his French cousin, artist Space Invader, who pastes small tile replicas of 8-bit video game aliens above the alleyways and thoroughfares of Paris. Space Invader introduces Guetta to a second artist, Shepard Fairey, who created the iconic red and blue Obama "HOPE" poster of the 2008 presidential election – another example of kairos at the intersection of art and politics. Here, narrator Rhys Ifans situates street art as a "movement" through a range of styles and materials, and piques viewer interest by outlining the danger, rush, and stealth needed to express oneself in a public space. Eventually, *Exit* brings Banksy and Guetta together for collaboration, and Banksy urges Guetta to edit his thousands of hours of valuable footage of street artists (a hodge-podge stored in plastic bins and shoeboxes) into a documentary – a vehicle for his message.

Ultimately, Banksy is horrified at Guetta's resulting 90 minute-mashup trainwreck, *Life Remote Control*. Banksy explains through voice-changer and pixilated black hoodie, "Thierry had all this amazing footage...and it would never happen again." So Banksy

turns the camera on Guetta, and transforms him from hapless director into rhetorically crafted street art persona “Mr. Brainwash.” So begins Guetta’s egotistical journey as he drains his bank accounts, refinances his business, and hires a staff of 100 collaborators to go into full-swing production on his ironically titled installation “Life is Beautiful.” Mr. Brainwash is a rhetorically orchestrated persona, sprung from Banksy’s mind like the fully-formed Athena from Zeus. However, there are so many layers of irony and critique, considering Banksy’s notoriety as an anarchic artist, even Banksy’s own broker admits, “I don’t know who the joke is on. I don’t know if there is a joke.”

Yet Banksy remains Thierry Guetta’s Holy Grail. Banksy’s allure is evident through his popular anti-war, anti-consumerism messages that scaffold his signature art. For example, *Exit* highlights his piece, “Balloon Girl,” which he composed on the wall of the West Bank. In silhouette, a pony-tailed girl is lifted skyward by balloons, presumably over the barrier. Besides Guetta’s obvious interest in Banksy’s art, however, the relationship between Banksy and Guetta remains complicated from the viewer’s perspective. There is some speculation that Banksy, perhaps along with other street artists, orchestrated the embedded documentary as one direct social critique of mass media, consumerism, and the adverse effects of institutionalized art. This criticism recognizes Guetta’s buffoonish tendencies as a product of Banksy’s puppeteering. To introduce this layer of consideration in the classroom, it would be productive to utilize Peter Elbow’s “doubting and believing” game for students to consider why Banksy might make such rhetorical choices. Officially, however, Banksy denies such claims and insists on his film’s authenticity.

Banksy’s criticism of mainstream ideologies (orchestrated or not) is evident as Guetta/MBW continues to skyrocket to success despite his inability to actually create art. His team uses Photoshop to digitally manipulate images and employs props builders to execute ideas, while MBW busies himself with hype and promotion. Regardless of the lack of artistic integrity, his “work” is a successful imitation of the styles he’d captured from Fairey and others, and the exhibit, complete with elephant, drew an appropriately hyped crowd. Banksy’s social critique, “building” an artist with no real artistic talent, raises

a number of important questions regarding authenticity and voice that prove interesting fodder for the composition classroom. He ultimately concludes, “I used to encourage everyone to make art, I used to think everyone should do it. But I don’t do that so much anymore.”

The assignments I’ve constructed in conjunction with *Exit Through the Gift Shop* ask students to think expressly about how their own bodies and others’ move through spaces – to reflect on the complex interactions of public spaces, the written and unwritten rules of social engagement, and teaches them to identify gaps in the rhetoric and dialogue of public space. In first and second year composition classrooms, I’ve used the opening chapter of feminist scholar Daphne Spain’s *Gendered Spaces* to provide a productive lens for examining this documentary. Though Spain’s academic writing style might not be immediately accessible, my composition students were invested enough in examining *Exit* as well as their own “Create Your Own Space” projects that they made the extra effort to wrestle with Spain’s heady theories. This pedagogical strategy creates the potential atmosphere for honest engagement that is so desired in ethos of writers and speakers; it encourages students to challenge notions of mainstream ideologies and critically examine intersections of politics and art.

One criticism of *Exit*, and an opportune time to invoke notions of power and gender via the *Gendered Spaces* chapter, is that it lacks female voices. Banksy’s purpose as director was to point out holes in the dialog and rhetoric of street art, and so too can students identify gaps in the conversation. *Exit* introduces artists such as Dotmasters, Swoon, Sweet Toof, Borf (who explains, “Borf is the name of my best friend who killed himself when we were 16, so I do this to kind of commemorate his life”), and Buffmonster. Of these monikers – evidence of artists’ underground status – Swoon is the only female artist. These omitted female voices are easily accessible in another documentary short *Creative Violation: The Rebel Art of the Street Stencil*, which is a mere 20 minutes and doesn’t provide the same depth as *Exit*, but works well in a time-crunched 50-minute class, as well as Cedar Lewisohn’s visually-stunning book, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* which highlights street artists such as Jenny

Holzer, Judith Sulpine, Martha Cooper, Miss Van, Lady Pink and others.

Exit Through the Gift Shop is not only an adventure in irony and politically and socially motivated art; it is a fascinating sojourn into the complexities of message, meaning, and public space. The documentary opens the composition classroom space as a forum for students to connect with their own and one another's shared spaces – neighborhoods, suburbs, bus stations and streets – to promote genuine, engaged dialogue and promote the critical and contextual understanding of multifaceted literacies and cultures.

Lauren Goldstein is a doctoral candidate at New Mexico State University. Her research interests include the rhetoric of gender and performance (last year she created *Butler for Babies – A Judith Butler Children's Book* as a semester project), as well as the impact of aesthetic choices on student engagement and retention rates in online composition classrooms. Assignments and materials from this public space unit, part of a conference project-in-progress, are available at laurengoldstein.weebly.com.

Works Cited

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