

Getting Banksy Right

by Ben Davis

13/01/11 5:49 PM EST



Banksy in "Exit Through the Gift Shop." Paranoid Pictures

There's more than an outside shot that British street art dynamo Banksy will be nominated for an Academy Award for his film "Exit Through the Gift Shop" (it's [on the shortlist for the documentary nod](#)) — that is, unless the Academy nominators are afraid that they're being punked. Because, the question, of course, is what category should the movie be filed under: documentary or fiction?

"Gift Shop" charts the seemingly unbelievable rise to fame of street-art chronicler Thierry Guetta, as he metamorphoses before Banksy's eyes into the artist known as Mr. Brainwash. The consensus that the film might be a hoax has been pervasive from the beginning, with [the New York Times dogging its Sundance debut](#) by charging it with "dodging the question" of the truth "or engaging with it cynically," and speculating that Guetta "is another art prank from Banksy."

Bristol's favorite son, meanwhile, has rather testily insisted that "Gift Shop" is the real deal. I'm inclined to believe him. And, in fact, I think that popular suspicion about the film says a lot about how his work gets misunderstood. People just don't get Banksy.

First of all, what do we know to be true in "Exit Through the Gift Shop"? One can understand why casual viewers of this thoroughly entertaining film might think that the kooky, cartoonish Mr. Brainwash is an invention. But not only is he real, but Banksy's damning portrait has not slowed him down. No less an authority than the Economist reported on Mr. Brainwash's Miami show in December, describing how he was ["mobbed by enthusiastic visitors."](#) In October, well after the release of "Gift Shop," an MBW work sold for \$100,000-plus at auction.

More importantly, film reviewers and art critics who cast a skeptical eye on Banksy's film miss what's emotionally authentic about it. By far the most affecting sequence is the opening montage, which cuts together clips of various contemporary street art heroes — known and unknown — tagging walls and fleeing the cops, all set to the flamboyantly romantic tune of "Tonight The Streets Are Ours." The film's admiration for the rebel energy of these semi-illegal acts of art is real.

Banksy's mocking take on the inexorable, bumbling rise of Thierry Guetta's Mr. Brainwash persona, and the air-kissing inauthenticity of the crowds drawn to his Los Angeles debut show in 2008, gets all its force from the fact that the film expresses a very real attachment to the defiant roots of the scene. Would anything be added to this core message if it turned out that the whole spectacle was an elaborately constructed hoax? Not really.

The reason why mainstream reviewers have shied from taking the film at face value is that received mainstream opinion on Banksy is that he is a "trickster." Sure, but what kind of trickster?

Well, Banksy famously snuck his own paintings into the Museum of Modern Art. But not to fool people into thinking that they actually belonged there — you knew immediately as soon as you actually looked at the graphics what was being pulled off. That's half of what's funny about it. He also [secretly dropped sham CD singles by Paris Hilton](#) into record bins — but, again, the gesture revealed itself pretty quickly: It was about mocking someone he considered to be manufactured, very much the way he takes down Mr. Brainwash for being a creature of hype in his film.

The conceit of "Exit Through the Gift Shop" — using footage by someone who was

making a documentary about him to make a documentary about the documentarian — is very much an I-can't-believe-he-got-away-with-that gesture in line with these earlier projects. [He's said that his filmmaking role models](#) are Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, makers of cheeky but sincere agitprop both, which sounds about right to me.

Let's not forget, finally, that Banksy's not about putting things over on people just for the hell of it. I can't bring myself to dislike his art, because it actually has a real anti-authoritarian kick that — for all the weaknesses of hit-and-run work when it comes to stimulating sustained discussion — feels more down-to-earth than a lot of the political art that you see at biennials. Banksy didn't just go to Disneyland to shock tourists. He went to plop the specter of the human-rights horror show of Guantanamo Bay into the middle of the Magic Kingdom. He didn't just go to the West Bank to bomb the "separation wall" because he wanted to pull off a really unbelievable stunt. He went to call attention to the ongoing plight of Palestinians.

The fact that the guy has some real anti-authoritarian bona fides — that he's often out to make a point, and not just moving from one outrage to the next — is something that's lost in the second-guessing about his film. His work is as straightforward as a brick. That's part of its charm.

Maybe this would be more obvious to people if the guy weren't so frickin' successful. It's easy to say that he wants to have his cake and eat it too, critiquing the system and being part of it. But as in the case of, say, the Sex Pistols — partly a marketing concoction — just because a phenomenon isn't some totally pure, uncalculated thing doesn't mean it's incapable of saying something meaningful.

Banksy's work has triumphed by tapping into UK tabloid culture. Part of the consequence of this is that the press tends to treat each of his new projects as nothing more than a publicity stunt for his own brand. There's some truth to that, for sure, but that's not all that's in there either. And if I'm wrong, well, hats off to Banksy — he's good enough that he's fooled at least one person.

[Interventions](#) is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com.