Honors LA 10

January 8, 2014

**Directions**: Read and annotate the following article and respond to the questions at the end in your journal. This is due at the beginning of class on Thursday, January 9th.

HERE'S WHY THE BANKSY MOVIE IS A BANKSY PRANK

BY [ALISSA WALKER](http://www.fastcodesign.com/user/alissa-walker) April 15, 2010

Accessed via <http://www.fastcompany.com/1616365/heres-why-banksy-movie-banksy-prank>

In the summer of 2008, I saw an [article in theLA Weekly](http://www.laweekly.com/2008-06-12/art-books/mr-brainwash-bombs-l-a/) about a massive street art show mounting in L.A. named [Life is Beautiful](http://www.neublack.com/gallery/slideshow.php?gallery=mr-brainwash-life-is-beautiful-show&image=0). On the outset the show seemed ambitiously cool. The 125,000-square-foot show was being staged in CBS' abandoned Columbia Square Studios, a massive modern office complex whereI Love Lucywas filmed. The artist, Mr. Brainwash or MBW, was an up-and-comer who had already plastered the city in his likeness, as a guy holding a video camera. And the timing for such a spectacle could not have been more perfect: Artists like [Shepard Fairey](http://www.fastcompany.com/tag/shepard-fairey" \t "_blank) had illegal works dotting same blocks as their gallery-installed shows, and we were all still talking about the dusty downtown warehouse [vandalized by Brit street art phenomenon Bansky](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/5344770.stm) two years ago.

But something here seemed off. The clichés. The rip-offs. The triteness of a [Campbell's Soup can crossed with a spray-paint can](http://theclick.us/2008/06/mr-brainwash-bombs-la/). All the Warhol references. The name "Mr. Brainwash." And most of all: [Ringing endorsements](http://obeygiant.com/headlines/mr-brainwash-life-is-beautiful-exhibition) for the show from the two most famous street artists in the world, Fairey and Banksy.

The whole thing, it's clear now, was an intricate prank being pulled on all of us by Banksy, who has never publicly revealed his identity, with Fairey as his accomplice.

The new "documentary" [Exit Through the Gift Shop](http://www.banksyfilm.com/), "directed" by Banksy, and "co-directed" by [Shepard Fairey](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/shepard-fairey), takes that prank one step further.

Ostensibly, Mr. Brainwash, whose real name is [Thierry Guetta](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/thierry-guetta), was a French-born ex-pat living in L.A. who had been attempting to make a documentary about street art when he came in contact with Banksy. The outrageous plot of the film is that Banksy was so horrified by Guetta's would-be movie--there's even an over-edited, bad "first cut" of the movie shown--and so fascinated with Guetta, that he turned the cameras on him, only to be completely blindsided when Guetta ripped off his style. That's what the movie says. But what really happened is that when Banksy did encounter the filmmaker, he convinced Guetta to pose as a budding graffiti artist wannabe so he and Fairey could "direct" him in real life--manufacturing a brand new persona that both celebrates and criticizes the over-commercialization of street art.

Guetta is the biggest give-away here. His klutzy, bumbling character (above) is blissfully over-the-top and clearly in on the ruse. His biography even has holes: Guetta is an orphan (when his mother died he was sent to a foster home, he says) with a family of at least four who lives in Los Angeles, yet he has no discernible income other than owning a vintage clothing store, which supposedly finances a decade's worth of trips to film street artists all over the world--as well as provides tens of thousands of dollars of capital for his own show. After Guetta decides he wants to become an artist, we follow him as he stumbles all over L.A., spilling paint, clumsily wheat pasting his own art, and--for good dramatic measure--he even puts his likeness right over an Obey image by Fairey. Touché. (Guetta himself has not made any press appearances connected with the film, but a recent Mr. Brainwash show [Icons](http://lookintomyowl.com/mr-brainwash-icons.html) opened in New York in February, and new works feature pieces of--ready for it?--broken records.)

Which leads me to the other problem. Besides watching him operate a can of spray paint, we never see Guetta actually create any art. His signature image, the guy with a camera, he says was drawn by an illustrator--and it looks like Banksy trying not to look like Banksy. At one point one of the army of graphic designers he hired through Craigslist holds up The Art Book tagged with Post-its showing what famous artworks they were instructed to rip off. He admits he also used help from Banksy's and Fairey's own factory-like teams. The show itself was produced by Daniel Salin (who produced Banksy's Barely Legalshow) and Roger Gastman, a co-founder of Fairey's magazine Swindle.(Some conspiracy theorists say that Guetta isBanksy, but that sounds ridiculous.)

Then there's the film plot's central concept: Banksy and Fairey both say they were so grateful to Guetta for documenting their highly illegal, middle-of-the-night work as street artists that they bended over backwards to help with his art career. But neither artist has ever had a problem attracting would-be documentarians. Quite the contrary. New work by Banksy that was put up in L.A.this week [attracted](http://nuart09.blogspot.com/2010/04/another-new-banksy-in-la.html) camera-happy fans within hours. And there's plenty of footage (even in the movie) of Banksy's own people [documenting him](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZK7D6WqzR0) working on walls in the West Bank, before he ever met Guetta.

Additionally, we're spoon-fed bizarre, effusive comments in the film about how famous Mr. Brainwash is, how his career has totally eclipsed that of Banksy and Fairey. This was echoed by Banksy in a recent [email interview with the LA Weekly](http://www.laweekly.com/2010-04-08/art-books/banksy-revealed/), which can only be read with tongue-in-cheek: "I continue to find the rise of Mr. Brainwash absolutely fascinating. His art sells for roughly double what mine does these days." Banksy's Space Girl & Bird went for a little over $500,000. So Mr. Brainwash, an artist that most people have never heard of, makes work that goes for a million?

As a straight documentary, this film is a snoozefest, an artist's love note to himself written in spray paint on a public wall. But Banksy isn't quite a straight-ahead kind of artist. He's a character based on surprise and coyness, someone whose work catches us where we least expect it, hours after he's fled the scene. And as another of his ruses, Exit Through the Gift Shop is as fun and well-conceived as the Banksy persona itself.

Journal Entry: **Was it a prank?**

1. Summarize Alyssa Miller’s view of *ETtGS* in your own words. Then make a list of the evidence/facts/opinions/suspicions that Alyssa Miller uses to support her assertion.
2. Do you believe this movie was a prank? Why or why not?
3. If the movie is a prank, does that make it less interesting, or valuable, or meaningful? Explain how.