FILM SUMMARY

EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP was originally meant to be a film documenting the street art movement. But when mysterious street artist Bansky realized that filmmaker Thierry Guetta lacked the ability to turn the hundred of hours of footage into a cohesive film, Bansky gave him a task: you become a street artist, and I will become filmmaker.

The result is a film directed by Bansky, who follows the movements of Guetta as he is introduced to some of the world’s most recognized street artists. Yet there is still one enigma that Guetta chases around the world—Bansky. When the two finally meet Guetta is on cloud nine, until Bansky encourages Guetta to release his film. Suddenly everyone realizes that Guetta is indeed not a filmmaker. Not wanting to lose the footage, Bansky takes on the task of filmmaker and challenges Guetta to ditch the camera and become a street artist. Viewers watch Guetta’s rise to fame under the pseudonym Mr. Brainwash, including a turn of events that was impossible to predict—even by Bansky. EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP culminates into a provocative, fascinating study of street art, vandalism, money, and fame, which brings up many questions but offers few answers.
**FILM THEMES**

Bansky does not ask direct questions in EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, but many questions about the nature and purpose of art arise. Can Bansky even be considered an “artist?” Is this film a real documentary or just a hoax? The answers aren’t clear. Use these themes to help guide your discussion.

**STREET ART: ART OR VANDALISM?**
Public art is a powerful vehicle for expression and for starting important dialogues. With permission, traditional graffiti and street art is considered public art. Without permission, graffiti and street artists are committing vandalism and are, by definition, criminals. While it’s true that some street artists are motivated by fame or destruction, other street artists like Bansky and Shepherd Fairey see their markings as a way to claim space from ever-increasing corporate control.

**THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF ART**
Many people see art as something separate from commerce—something authentically created by an inspired artist. But, as EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP reveals, this isn’t always the case. Thierry Guetta had no training as an artist, and yet, through clever marketing and endorsements, he managed to create an art show that became a great commercial success.

**STREET ART AS POLITICAL ACTIVISM**
Street art is more than just painting something beautiful or cool on a public wall. It’s about the people who decide what should be shown in public space, the messages that are advertised, and how the messages affect us all. Banksy has made himself known for doing politically inspired pieces of artwork—for example, by critiquing entities like capitalism, war, and hypocrisy.

**POLITICAL SATIRE**
Political satire is often used to analyze one’s society and policies. It is simultaneously humourous and smart while exposing something which the satirist perceives as wrong or ridiculous. Banksy’s is known for using satire in his work. EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP is, in itself, satirical commentary on various aspects of the art world, from the commercialization of contemporary art to the endless subjective debate on what constitutes an art.

“The thing I hate the most about advertising is that it attracts all the bright, creative and ambitious young people, leaving us mainly with the slow and self-obsessed to become our artists.... Modern art is a disaster area. Never in the field of human history has so much been used by so many to say so little.”

Bansky
FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. There has been extensive debate about whether the film is a real documentary or just a hoax. What do you think? Does it even matter whether it’s real or not?

2. Did this film change your view of street art? Of street artists?

3. Can you remember any street art that you have come across? How did you react to it?

4. Is it possible to draw a line between street art and vandalism? If so, where should the line be drawn?

5. What makes someone an artist?... General consensus? The work itself? The idea behind it? The years of effort it took to get to that point? Is art about going where no one has gone before?

6. Do you like street art? If so, is there any point in the film where you think the artists went too far? Or, are you opposed to the concept of street art?

7. The film raises a question about what should be defined as art. What are your thoughts? What is art to you?

8. How do you feel about political satire? Is it an effective way to criticize society that would otherwise not be open to criticism? In Bansky’s case, do you think his hilarious film succeeded in criticizing the art world, specifically the commercialization of art?

9. Who owns the streets and other public spaces? Who gets to advertise their messages? What effect does it have on society when money determines what gets advertised in public?

10. Is there value in creative expression that is outside of the mainstream art market?
FILM FACTS:

1. EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP has won 15 awards during 2010 and 2011. On top of that, it was awarded runner up in four awards and nominated for another 13 awards, including “Best Documentary” at the 2011 Academy Awards.

2. In 1985, Allan Schwartzman wrote a book called “Street Art” about early street art pioneers like Richard Hambleton, Keith Haring, and John Fekner, as well as artists in the graffiti camp like Lee and Futura. Today, Schwartzman is one of New York City’s top contemporary art advisors.

3. The Underbelly Project brought about 100 artists into an abandoned shell of a subway underneath New York City. Graffiti stars like Faile, Swoon, Revok, and Ron English were all included, but two big names were absent from the project. It’s no surprise that Banksy did not participate, but Shepard Fairey didn’t get into the station either.

4. A famous example of art that was installed in a public space without the city’s permission is the Charging Bull statue, known as The Wall Street Bull in New York City. Artist Arturo Do Modica developed the concept, created the sculpture, trucked it to Lower Manhattan, and installed it as a Christmas gift to the people of New York. It was initially removed and then returned and has now been there for over two decades.

5. In 2011, street artist JR won the TED Prize, which awards $1 million dollars to an extraordinary individual with a creative and bold vision to spark global change. JR has created a large-scale participatory art project that transforms messages of personal identity into pieces of art. His posters display a vibrant world of diverse communities.

6. Thierry Guetta owned a lot of property in Los Angeles, and street artists often asked him to provide walls for them to paint on. This small, but important piece of information was left out of the film, Exit Through the Gift Shop, but explains how Guetta was able to film so many artists.

7. “A Love Letter For You” is a series of murals by Steve Powers in west Philadelphia. They were organized by the Mural Arts Program, which is responsible for thousands of murals in Philadelphia since the mid-1980s. What’s surprising about the collaboration is that Steve Powers began his art career as a graffiti writer in Philadelphia, and the Mural Arts Program began as part of Philadelphia’s Anti-Graffiti Network as a program to cover and deter graffiti.

8. In 2011, Mr. Brainwash held a solo exhibition at the Opera Gallery in London. The exhibition sold out in two days.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share the film: Encourage others to watch the film and discuss the questions raised.

2. Watch street artist and TED Prize winner JR’s TED talks about his project “Inside Out.”

3. Write a letter to your local government officials (city, county, or state) and tell them what you think about the street art movement. Share your opinion about what stance your city should take on whether or not street art should be tolerated.

4. Do some research into the broad range of street art being made today. Mr. Brainwash, Bansky, and their cohorts are just a handful of the people participating in this movement. The diversity of street art being created is impressive: A good place to start your research is StreetArtUtopia.com.