

Exit Through the Gift Shop

Discussion Guide

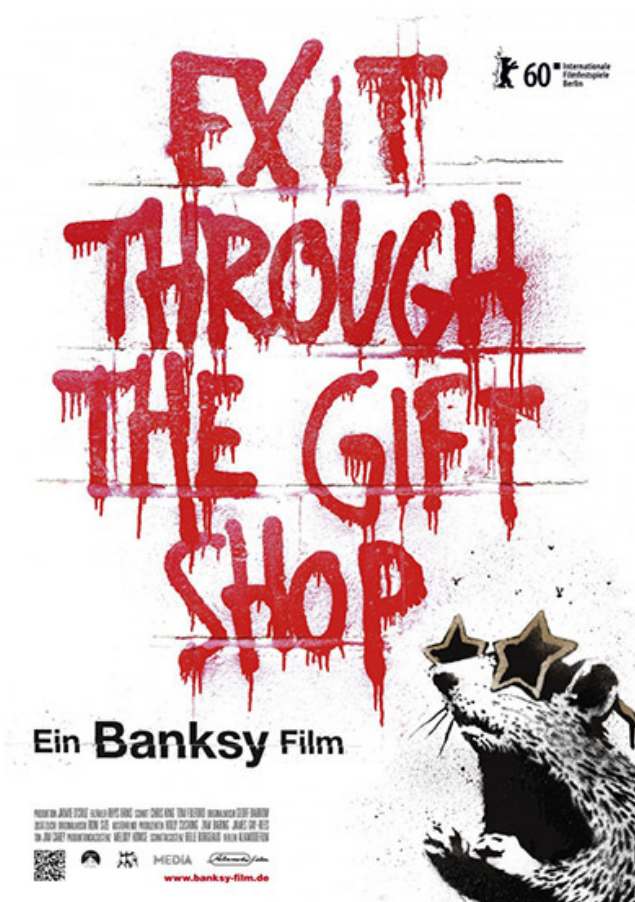
Director: Banksy

Year: 2010

Time: 87 min

You might know this director from:

EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP is Banksy's first film, but his graffiti artwork has been visible in streets and galleries all over the world.



FILM SUMMARY

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

The result is a film directed by Banksy, 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—Banksy. When the two finally meet, Guetta is overjoyed until Banksy encourages Guetta to release his film. Suddenly everyone realizes that Guetta is indeed not a filmmaker. Not wanting to lose the footage, Banksy 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 Banksy. 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

Banksy does not ask direct questions in EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, but many questions about the nature and purpose of art arise. Can Banksy be considered an “artist”? Is this film a real documentary or just a hoax? The answers aren’t always clear.

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 Banksy and Shepherd Fairey see their markings as a way to claim space from ever-increasing corporate control.

STREET ART AS POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Street art involves 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 issues like capitalism, war, and hypocrisy —offering viewpoints and raising questions that are outside of mainstream media.

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF ART

Many believe that art is something separate from commerce—something authentically created by an inspired artist. Others believe that art and commerce are closely related, that there’s an ever-present tension between the desires of the artist and the desires of the consumer. In EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, Thierry Guetta has no training as an artist, and yet, through clever marketing and endorsements, he manages to create an art show that becomes a great commercial success.

POLITICAL SATIRE

Political satire is often used to analyze one’s society and policies. It is simultaneously humorous and clever while exposing something which the satirist perceives as wrong or ridiculous. Banksy is notorious for using satire in his work. EXIT THROUGH THE GIFTSHOP 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.”

Banksy

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 graffiti artists?
3. Try to recall some of the graffiti or street art you have come across. What impressions did these works leave you with? Which were most memorable, and why?
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 they create? The ideas behind their work? The years of effort it takes to create? 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 poses questions about the definition of art. In your opinion, what qualifies as art? What does not? And why?
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 Banksy'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. What is the value of creative expression that is found and exhibited outside of the mainstream art market?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP has won 15 awards during 2010 and 2011. On top of that, it was awarded runner-up in 4 awards and nominated for another 13 awards, including “Best Documentary” at the 2011 Academy Awards.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, but explains how Guetta was able to film so many artists.
- “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 is 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.
- 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 talk about his project “Inside Out”.
3. Write 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 allowed.
4. Research the broad range of street art being made today. [Mr. Brainwash](#), [Banksy](#), 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](#).

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.