



Exit Through the Gift Shop

(2010, Banksy, UK)

Component 2: Global filmmaking perspectives

Core study areas:

- Key elements of film form
- Meaning and response
- The contexts of film

Specialist study areas:

- Filmmakers' theories
- Critical debates



Image by cea + / Flickr.com / CC BY 2.0

first feature film by him and was critically and commercially very well received. It showcases several street artists, captures the dangers and risks of this illegal art form, and is, above all, a huge send up of the artistic elite. It makes us wonder what, if any of it, was real, and what was just a hugely elaborate hoax. Yet, like all the best jokes, the humour makes us address big questions such as those of identity, of the nature of art, of fame, and of something's value.

- In terms of documentary, it really questions that age old message: just what is real, and can it ever be captured? It does this with great wit and style – it's pretty much like nothing ever before.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequence and timings

The montage to Richard Hawley's celebratory song *Tonight the Streets are Ours* (00:00:50)

Banksy is seen (00:02:50)

We are introduced to Thierry Guetta (00:03:25)

Thierry Guetta's backstory – 00:25-04

Street artists, but now in black and white (00:26:52 – 00:27:04)

Synopsis and rationale for study:

- Banksy has become a world-renowned artist and has arguably single-handedly placed street art in the public consciousness, both in the UK and worldwide. This was a much heralded



CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form

Cinematography

- The camera work is totally varied; often deliberately amateur, often with establishing shots. The amateur style is in the awkward use of zooming in on the action, frequently out of focus or poorly framed. The grainy images add to this, as does the poor levels of lighting adjustment in the night-time filmed sequences. Look at how Banksy combines cheap quality images with the notions of parody, danger and amateur actions.
- Often shot with camcorders and handheld equipment to enhance the appearance of verisimilitude.

Mise-en-scène

00:22:35–00:22:40

- The courtyard where Thierry is filmed is designed for clues to the mystery. It is like an Edgar Wright Easter egg. Thierry is seen in a comic typically French hat. On his wall is a line of worn and slightly damaged plants in terracotta pots. Is this a verbal joke: *crackpot*?
- To reinforce this idea, we have a pair of wardrobe doors with nothing behind, like an illusionist's prop in a magic act. Then, a blurred oil painting; it looks like a portrait, but then it also looks irreverent. Finally, a mysterious black panel with gold speckled light. All these things act as visual signifiers: all is illusion, mystery, artifice; nothing is as it seems.

Editing

- The editing style of the film is swift and anarchic. It follows no set pattern, and the pace and flow constantly change, as if following improvised action and events.
- 00:22:40 – Only more documented moments of the art are seemingly constructed. E.g., the introduction of Banksy's art with a montage of images to a mix of modern drum and bass sounds, combined with more *classical* instrumentation, cutting to the beat (synaesthesia) as a series of iconic Banksy street

art images are shown, followed by newspaper headlines. This gives the film a lot of content within a very fast paced sequence.

Sound

- Lots of diegetic sound to accompany street filming.
- The interviews with 'Banksy' are slightly questionable – the sound is too loud, slightly distorted; either deliberate to disguise his voice, or deliberately amateur.
- The music of Geoff Barrow is varied, for emotional effect; it is sometimes rhythmic, sometimes thoughtful.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Ethnicity, age and gender

There is nothing of particular focus for Banksy here. One could argue that there is a distinct lack of females on screen, and that the multicultural diversity is very limited. However, it is a portrayal of the street art world, and its main players at that time. Again, age isn't a focus – everyone seems to be male mature adults. There are no traditional older artistic experts discussing the merits of the art, as one would find in traditional documentaries, with more formulaic structures.

Aesthetics

- The film has a very loose aesthetic. Many of the sequences include handheld shots, with grainy images, and shots going in and out of focus. There is frequent pixelation of faces to hide identities, adding to the danger and excitement around the street artist.
- The comedic intention always comes through in the alleged Banksy interview incepts. For instance:
00:12:12 – Banksy states: '*We all needed someone who knew how to use a camera.*' The next moment is a cut to extremely amateurish filmed shots of walking, a shadow appearing in the pavement, and then a crash into litter bins, and the word '*F***.*' The aesthetic effect



is one of high comedy, pratfalls, and gags; another bookmark moment to lead us to not take anything we see too seriously.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts of film

Social

- Street art had been an emerging artistic movement since the 1980s in America. It was often associated with Black culture, music and expression, and graffiti frequently had a clear politicised message. Banksy emerged as an artist, first in Bristol, and then internationally, in the late 1980s and 90s, being part of a counterculture with hip-hop, and then trip-hop. The composer of *Exit* is Geoff Barrow, founder of Bristol based trip-hop band Portishead.

Cultural

- Banksy taps into two cultural movements and trends with *Exit*. Firstly, the rise of the mockumentary sub-genre of documentary started with films like *This is Spinal Tap* (Reiner, 1984) and *Best in Show* (Guest, 2000), and was then made popular by *Jackass* (Tremaine, 2002).
- Secondly, *Exit* is perfectly timed to reinforce Banksy as the leading figure in the now established art form of street art and graffiti.

Historical

- Many documentaries are made on art, artists and artistic movements. They are usually shown on TV on channels such as Sky Arts and Sky Documentaries, or as popular features on streaming platforms like Netflix, which may also showcase productions like the *Imagine* series on BBC commissioned by Alan Yentob. However, few documentaries on art ever make it to the big screen as a cinema release.

Political

- The politics within *Exit* isn't direct; it is more ideological, a celebration of creativity, a send up of traditional structures and institutions, and an anarchic spirit of subversion and parody.
- Banksy has become an increasingly politically motivated artist since his underground origins.

The organisations he has supported include Greenpeace, the issue of immigration and the plight of refugees by boat, the NHS during Covid, and the plight of Palestinians in the Middle East.

- **00:28:12** – Palestine.
The latter in the previous point is shown in the sequence on the wall between Palestine and Israel.
- **00:41:29–00:44** – Guantanamo.
There is a further sequence that is filmed largely in a reflexive mode, as supposedly Banksy and Thierry infiltrate Disneyland and place an inflatable figure in an orange jumpsuit alongside a ride, to remind the crowds of America's response to suspected terrorist acts. However, it is not clear if this is real or faked – Banksy talks of going on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride as Thierry is interrogated. Is this real? The sinister underscore is generic of paranoid thrillers. Everything is exaggerated in effect; and references to the '*Mickey Mouse security team*' suggest it is all a parody.

Institutional

- The film was made by Indie company Revolver. It had a low budget, but due to Banksy's aura and mystery, it became heavily discussed on news and cultural platforms on both the internet and terrestrial TV.
- The official trailer is fascinating and so irreverent. In **00:00:14** it has the Oscar logo, and then reveals: '*Best Picture... of leaves on a trailer*'; '*Cannes ... is a nice place to visit*', and the use of the four stars needs to be seen as a review credit. It is totally irreverent to Hollywood and all the official festivals and critical opinions.
- The premiere of the film was in a disused space under Waterloo Station that Banksy transformed into a pop-up cinema space; the place opened for one week and sold out for every screening. The mystique around the film was only enhanced by this anti-establishment premiere location, as far from the red carpet as imaginable.



- Finally, the film made \$5.6 million, on a budget of less than \$1m, and was nominated for an Oscar in the Best Documentary category. Banksy is the modern complete artist: populist, commercially a huge success, a critical favourite, a scathing political commentator, and hugely accessible.
- However, part of the fun and the ingenuity of *Exit* is we can never be sure what is genuinely archived footage, and what is fabricated to look real. This makes us question the real and the fake, the value of things, and the subjective nature of all things; it is all in the eye of the beholder, except that it is always being *shown* to us in deliberately manipulative ways.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA 1 – STARTING POINTS: Filmmakers’ theories

Both filmmakers Nick **Broomfield**, with participatory filming, and Michael **Moore**, with a blend of expository, reflexive and performative styles, are possible points of comparison.

- Look at the opening of *Bowling for Columbine* (dir. Moore, 2001) and the mix of reflexive and performative styles of filming, as he takes us into a bank that gives us a free gun for opening an account. The comic tones, the disbelief, and the director as lead and star make us see him as an everyman figure we can identify with and are an interesting comparison with Thierry in *Exit*.
- In the opening of *Exit*, Thierry is seen as a reflexive filmmaker, going everywhere with his equipment. The humour is again at the forefront, with zany, carnivalesque music playing as point of view shots speed us through a supermarket.
- 00:06:01–00:06:45 – Jay Leno is filmed on the streets in and out of focus, hand up to stop the camera; then Oasis on the street, being typically argumentative. Fame, intrusion and privacy are all explored in these moments and are all issues fundamental to the Banksy myth. Again, you could compare with Moore here, and his chasing politicians in *Fahrenheit 9-11* (dir. Moore 2003) or of Charlton Heston in *Bowling*.

Archive – There is much use of archive footage which captures and celebrates the work of many leading street artists, including, of course, Banksy himself.

- This is again a technique that Moore frequently uses, for either comic or political effect, often in the form of a montage – i.e., his *Happiness is a Warm Gun* or *What a Wonderful World* montages from *Bowling*.

Mockumentary – Other documentary modes and theories are of potential relevance: the mockumentary (made famous by films like *This is Spinal Tap* or Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Borat* (dir. Charles, 2006), is interesting to consider. We can link this to Moore’s approach, who sometimes uses humour to lampoon the subject of his work. However, Thierry Guetta has become an established artist. Banksy’s intervention in his life, his encouragement to have an exhibition under the moniker of Mr Brainwash, and his subsequent development as a commercial artist have all happened, and continue to happen, so this film is a little more complex than just a mockumentary. It shows just how far notoriety, publicity and celebrity endorsement can take you in the artistic community. Surely the joke is on the art establishment, the dealers and the paying audiences here. Banksy, like Moore, is overtly polemical in taking up a clear point of view, in what might be called an agitprop documentary.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA 2 – CRITICAL DEBATES: Digital technology

00:07:00–00:08:51

- **Space Invader sequence** – A reflexive sequence with a handheld camera, and we literally go downstairs as Rhys Ifans’s voiceover talks of a ‘*dramatic new direction*.’ Pixelations hide Space Invader’s face. Diegetic street sounds make the locations seem alive, as traffic is heard.
- This is the era of the camcorder; the first iPhone was released in 2007, but not commonly owned or used, and other smartphones were not on the market. The lo-fi filming gives it a sense of verisimilitude, and this is enhanced by crude zoom ups to placing Space Invader’s images around LA streets.



- The montage that follows, with rumbling bass and Ifans's guiding voice, gives the sequence an energy. It is the most expository sequence in the film, with synaesthesia (images cut to the beat of the music), clear narration and a summary message: *'Street art was poised to be the biggest counterculture movement since punk.'*

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS 01:14:58–the end

Fame, money, and meaningless art

- 01:14:58 – After Mr Brainwash's (MBW) LA show has become such a huge critical and commercial success, it is evaluated. Banksy begins, from his hooded hideout: *'There's no one quite like Thierry really, even if his art does seem quite a lot like everyone else's.'* The music is like a caricature, to reinforce the satirical nature of the film's end, suggesting the hollowness of much of modern art, and the emptiness of art and fame in a postmodern world.
- 01:15:15 – A sequence of art works is shown totally derivative of Andy Warhol, and MBW comments on them with the adoring crowd. Cameras photograph everything. Images become more absurd – Spock as Marilyn, *a la Warhol*. Thierry is shown in every shot, *milking* the fame.
- 01:15:43 – Ifans narrates how the ultimate validation is money, with a cutaway shot to a credit card scanner.
- 01:15:59 – Then Thierry is filmed, lying down on a bank(sy), with a Disney like façade behind. He is the ultimate inflated ego. Cutaways show him and the crowd, and he is *'as good as Banksy.'* Wallpaper shots show him mixing with adoring crowds.
- 01:16:45 – Ifans summarises in a voiceover how MBW's fame spreads globally. Cutaways show dot to dot, side by side, images of John Lennon and Andy Warhol, while Banksy tells of Warhol making icons by repetition meaningless, but *'Thierry really made them meaningless.'* The next image is Elvis playing a machine gun rather than guitar.
- 01:17:51 – Thierry is shown with his family, on the phone, and a commentary describes his rise, and calls it *'anthropologically, sociologically, a fascinating thing to observe.'* Is this the joke in a nutshell? Is Banksy saying the joke is on art and the joke is on us for watching, for being duped? The French accordion in the background is so clichéd, it would suggest it is all parody.
- 01:20:27 – The final shot is the wall of *Life is beautiful* crashing to the ground; the façade, the artifice, is destroyed, and revealed as one-dimensional.
- 01:20:42 HOWEVER, beyond this, in the credits, the street artists are celebrated, and the song *Tonight the streets are ours* returns. *Exit* might be laughing at the art world, and those within it and its emptiness, but it is joyous too, and remains celebratory about the power of street art to excite the imagination and to be challenging and political. What do you think when you watch; what's the joke; who is the joke on; and as Banksy asks, is there even a joke? No one quite knows for sure; the man of mystery adds further to his mysterious appeal.

Coda: Mr Brainwash, a concept that only existed because of this documentary, is still earning a sizeable living as an artist. Look at his work for sale. Has Banksy just shown, in this documentary, that he can create celebrity and reputations by hype and by notoriety? Is this just one giant post-modern joke on getting noticed, getting hits etc.?