

5. Enter the Performance Street Art: The staged and constructed persona

Banksy | *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010)

Exit Through the Gift Shop is a commercial feature film that for the first time publically displays the British genre-defining street artist Banksy in person. It is intended for a wider audience than *Enjoy Poverty* and, since it is produced by the ostentatiously non-academic artist that Banksy is, less configured to theoretical and critical discourses than both Schlingensief's and Martens' or Fraser's work.¹ The ways its most prominent theme – the notion of authenticity – is dealt with hardly meet the expectations of a scholarly art historical assessment.² However, a number of the film's aspects speak in favour of including it in a research on the use of personae in critical performance, and as a work of popular culture it underlines the use of personae in critique as a wider cultural phenomenon. Those aspects, as introduced below, correspond to the sections of this chapter, and allow for a chronological discussion of the film.

Firstly, the real star of the film, Banksy 'himself' is a constructed persona, both within the confines of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* as aesthetic object as well as beyond that, part of everyday reality. Still they are generally taken at face value. Banksy's anonymity barely provokes the assumption that there may be no 'Banksy'. On the contrary, the relentless curiosity about his identity only indicates the firm common belief that there exists a "man behind the wall", to echo the subtitle of Will Ellsworth-Jones' independent monograph.³ Banksy uses the film to stage himself in ways that reinforce his public persona.

Secondly, Banksy's co-star Thierry Guetta transforms into 'Mr. Brainwash' halfway through the film. As I will demonstrate, this means *Exit Through the Gift Shop* shows and performs the creation of a persona. Mr. Brainwash' persona is informed by his art practice, and at the same time, his practice can be considered a metonymy of his persona. This renders identity construction in the arts a prominent theme in the film. It also implies the question whether an identity that is being very obviously constructed can be considered real and equally valuable.

Thirdly, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is considered a mockumentary, and Mr. Brainwash is sometimes as a hoax. Although it has many documentary genre specificities – which I will explicate when they come up – a lot of it seems to be staged. As such, the film reduplicates the theme of constructed and ambiguous identity, and establishes it on the narrative level of the aesthetic object. I will reconstruct the production of the film to the extent that is possible and desirable within this chapter on basis of various sources and clues. The ambivalence of fiction and documentary is part and parcel of the film, but I will demonstrate a strong suggestion of a scheme.

And fourthly, this possibility of a scheme does allow for an assessment of Guetta's/Mr. Brainwash' persona. It also necessitates a reconsideration of Banksy's persona. Finally, it enables the spectator to understand the operations of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* as a critique.

¹ On January 24 2010, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Subsequently, it was shown in commercial movie theatres internationally. It was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature (which was awarded to *Inside Job*) despite the rumours that it be a mockumentary. *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is street artist Banksy's directorial debut, after which he made another film called *The Antics Roadshow* (2011), a montage of found footage of various degrees of civil disobedience. *Exit Through the Gift Shop* features a good amount of appropriated material as well. For this chapter, I used the DVD version: Banksy, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, Paranoid Pictures Film Company Limited, 2010, as well as the official trailer.

² This also explains the limited amount of useful literature on the film, and legitimizes a case study slightly shorter than the first two.

³ Will Ellsworth-Jones, *Banksy. The Man Behind the Wall*, London: Aurum Press, 2012.

5.1 Staging Banksy's persona

The opening credits show a rich variety of famous and lesser-known street artists, satisfying the average Banksy fan's expectations of seeing a film on street art.⁴ If those expectations include catching a glimpse of the secluded Brit, they are satisfied already in the first scene. How does Banksy use this opportunity to reveal himself to an audience that is eager to know his identity? The artist is shown wearing a hooded sweater, made unrecognisable with a mysterious shadowy darkness over his face and his voice digitally distorted, mouth invisible, seated in various places of a studio covered in graffiti. In the establishing shot, he is joined by a puppet in the shape of a monkey head, as if Robin the Hooded Man and the human's evolutionary blueprint are ventriloquizing one another, by way of a typical Banksy joke: witty, but not necessarily consequential (fig. 5.1).⁵ The lighting is carefully choreographed: the glass bell-covered monkey head as well as the graffiti-covered back wall are well visible, while Banksy sits centrally, but in a shadow. Only his hands, the skilled tools of the "graffiti artist" (as the caption introduces him), are in the light. It suggests that his face nor his natural identity matter, for it is Banksy's hand crafted art that speaks for him.

Through symbols framing his identity while being anonymous, Banksy is staged as an personification of the 'romantic' core values of street art that are fundamental to his fame: the surrounding graffiti positions him in the tradition of authenticity and artistic skill that is associated with the genre of tags and 'pieces'; his disguise refers to a pseudo-illegality and being wanted by the police that adds extra street credibility; the undercover set up in its totality should be considered a glorification of Banksy's public image as 'unknown', which relates to the celebration of individuality and self-promotion that is at the root of the graffiti and street art subcultures. A large part of the staging of Banksy's image is effectively completed in this first scene. In a number of later scenes, Banksy's filmed in another spot where a wall painting of a Baroque cherub wearing a bullet proof vest with red blood spot at the heart (the commonplace art historical reference is culture-jammed to remind of present-day powers that would be menacing the innocence and beauty, so it seems) is lit with a spotlight that also illuminates a print series of crowned monkeys with Royal Air Force signs (illustrating his playful criticism of the establishment), a canvas with Banksy's signature rats stencilled on it (like a tag, rats form a trademark continuity in Banksy's work, the pest suggests the symbolism of socially undesired, repressed and marginalized), and the remainders of destroyed picture frames (suggesting iconoclasm and a revolutionary role in art history) (fig. 5.2).⁶ I will return to a couple of slight elaborations of Banksy's image below.

This first scene starts with Banksy sitting down while a voice can be heard asking for a sound check (Banksy goes "one-two, one-two") and the voice continues, "So ehm, I guess I'll start off by asking you about the film. What is the film?"⁷ Banksy explains that it is "the story of what happened when this guy tried to make a documentary about me. But he was actually a lot more interesting than I am. So now the film is about him. It's not gone with the wind, but there is probably a moral in there somewhere."⁸ He not only appears and speaks, he also foregrounds his selfhood by using the first

⁴ Many of these fragments seem to be taken from existing films or videos. *Exit Through the Gift Shop* credits the following films, all street art and graffiti related: *Dirty Hands: The Art and Crimes of David Choe*, *Infamy*, *Inside Outside*, *Next*, *Open Air*, *The Lyfe*, *Popaganda: The Art and Crimes of Ron English*, *Rash*, *Restless Debt of the Third World*, *Spending Time*, *Turf War*, *Elis G The Life of a Shadow*, *Memoria Canalla*, *C215 in London*, *Beautiful Losers*.

⁵ *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 2min44. One could think of Banksy's iconic image of *Pulp Fiction*'s John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson aiming bananas instead of guns, or his omnipresent rats. Both are visual puns and powerful images with a hint of criticality that depends on the spectator and does not persuade of any position by itself. Banksy is often compared to a Robin Hood figure, who could be seen as stealing the idea of art from the rich and giving it to the man in the street for free. See for example: Andrew Anthony, 'Banksy: the artist who's driven to the wall', *The Observer*, Sunday 20 April 2014, accessed through <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/apr/20/observer-profile-banksy-street-art>, on 5 June 2014.

⁶ *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, around 30min.

⁷ Narrator in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 2min46.

⁸ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 2min55.

person singular and suggesting a moral lecture of the film. At the same time, this ‘self’ is highly stylized in ways that overdo his public image as it already existed. But this unexpected metaphorical point of departure also indicates between the lines that Guetta/Mr. Brainwash, and maybe the transformation in particular, should be seen as vehicles of signification. So while Banksy reinforces his public image by visually establishing and symbolically reiterating it, he employs a character of a more strategic, narrative kind at the same time. There are many of such scenes throughout the film, but the interviewer’s voice is never heard again. Still it suggests two things. Firstly, that Banksy is spontaneous and candid, speaking of the cuff, enhancing the truthful documentary feel that the film leans on. Secondly, that there is an interviewer who co-directs the way people are portrayed, and that Banksy does not function as an *auteur* director writing and staging the film in detail. Of course, this may be the case, but it is tempting to assume that such scenes, operating more or less like self portraits, are carefully scripted. For now, I will refer to these scenes (of Banksy as well as others) as portrait scenes.

Banksy still refrains from officially revealing his true identity, but it is known that he is a man from Bristol, born in 1973, whose name is Robin Gunningham. *The Daily Mail* revealed this in 2008, after BBC World News had already published a photo of him working on a work he claimed later (fig. 5.3).⁹ The general audience seems to accept that Banksy does not appear in public, and the pseudo-anonymity stands. Banksy’s identity as an open secret also holds people back to question this actual person hiding behind the elaborate mask that Banksy is. But on basis of the scale and technical complexities of various Banksy productions one could speculate that ‘Banksy’ by now rather seems an institute encompassing a collective of artists, cinematographers, copywriters and screenwriters, producers and managers than a single person.¹⁰ *Exit Through the Gift Shop* and Banksy’s 2011 film *Antics Roadshow* certainly testify of this possibility, but various large scale and hyped exhibitions as well as a number of publications suggest that there is at least a large team around any individual. Even Ellsworth-Jones, Banksy’s unauthorized would-be biographer who did a thorough inquiry on every known move by Banksy up until 2011, does not seem to consider that the household name by now may be considered the name of an institution.¹¹ For the sake of readability, however, I will simply use the name Banksy here both to refer to the figure in the portrait scenes as to the filmmaker(s).

Rather, people seem to desire believing in the construction itself: the Banksy that is embedded in a romantic view of the artist as a isolated genius-*auteur*, gifted not only with artisanal artistic skills but also with a world view that sets him apart from the capitalist mainstream and the institutional art world alike. No context legitimates his public image better than a background in the pseudo-illegal subversive counterculture of graffiti. This identity feature is essential to distinguish Banksy from less-credible, authentically streetwise, original, witty followers. *Exit Through the Gift Shop* forms the perfect vehicle to reinforce it, and Banksy uses it to stage himself accordingly. As Banksy’s public persona is finally personified here in the context of a highly stylized aesthetic object, one could say (as with Schlingensiefel and Martens) that the public persona can be considered a performance persona.

To offer a provisional reading of Banksy in terms of *persona*, the ‘Banksy’ here depicted, then, is an image consisting of various references, some by way of Daston and Sibum’s culturally recognisable types and some more specific of the artist’s public persona. The image in its totality is a

⁹ Claudia Joseph, ‘Graffiti artist Banksy unmasked ... as a former public schoolboy from middle-class suburbia’, in: *The Daily Mail*, 12 July 2008. Accessed through: <http://www.daily-mail.co.uk/femail/article-1034538/Graffiti-artist-Banksy-unmasked--public-schoolboy-middle-class-suburbia.html> on 3 June 2014.

¹⁰ It can be worthwhile to think again of the first portrait scene with Banksy that is preceded by the voice of an interviewer who decides to start asking what the film is, and consider that there may indeed have been a spontaneity, dialogue and interview – in the modality of self-portrait. A group of people who collectively constitute everything bearing the name ‘Banksy’, among each other could be acting out the constitution of the Banksy persona, scripted or not.

¹¹ Ellsworth-Jones refers frequently to ‘Team Banksy’ (which is a very small team, according to him) but always maintains the idea of the *auteur*-artist genius ‘Banksy’ firmly in place. See chapter ‘Welcome to Team Banksy’, pp. 155-180.

substitute for a subject that is known to exist but is almost disconnected from the public persona, as well as for a group of people that are certainly employed to work for 'Banksy', but not publicly so (equally disconnected). The way in which Banksy's star personality is performed and staged evokes Auslander's performance persona. In addition, there is a hint of a 'character' in Auslander's sense that is there for the sake of the narrative of the aesthetic object, when Banksy points at his co-star as more or less interesting than himself. Banksy's persona also recalls Buchloh's suggestion that Beuys created a public persona by performing the role of the artist as a variety of characters. It is impossible to say whether Buchloh would consider a performance so explicitly framed within an aesthetic object as 'public', yet as this is the first time Banksy shows himself to the general audience, this could certainly be considered an instance of publicness. As there is only the suggestion of natural identity hidden behind the artificial image, Mauss' historiography of *persona* based on changed perceptions of personal identity does not seem to apply on Banksy greatly. This only affirms the potential power of a persona, as one could certainly consider the image as a substitute of natural identity that, in situations including but not restricted to mediated contexts, is convincing, operational and real: a public persona that does not need a natural identity to be credible.

But what indeed is interesting about Thierry Guetta?

5.2 Thierry Guetta

The next scenes, backed by cheesy pseudo-French accordion music, introduce this Guetta. The general public may already have been familiar with the clumsiness of this man, as in the official trailer of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* he can be seen walking into a street lamppost.¹² This Frenchman who settled in Los Angeles, running a second hand clothing business, heading a family, is like a caricature. His appearance resembles that of a cartoon figure, slightly corpulent, a silly hat, retro clothes, a moustache running into oversize sideburns, but also heavily gesticulating and sporting a thick French accent, so appears in the numerous portrait scenes. Guetta could be described as a caricature of a foreign Hollywood comedian, and an annoying one, being impolite and oblivious of his social environment. But his attribute is what sticks the most: Guetta's camera is ever-present, he is videotaping around the clock, as a veritable camera addict (fig. 5.4). He captures everything he encounters, but never watches anything back, nor does he organize anything. As he recounts his personal history through a voice-over, sometimes assisted by a narrator and interviews with people who know him well, the spectator sees random images of family life, supermarkets, his shop, et cetera, apparently all filmed by him. His habit is central to this biographical sequence, and it is explained as an obsession: from the moment he picked up the camera, he could not do anything without capturing. People who know him are so used to it that they do not even notice the camera anymore. His need of documenting is contextualized later in the film as a result of a youth trauma: after losing his mother at a young age, he wants to capture everything he experiences, "make the moments live forever".¹³ Thierry registers, but does not watch. Not at the present time, nor later.

The rest of the film proceeds in line with documentary conventions going back and forth deriving continuity from the interrelation of statements in human-interest-like portrait scenes (Banksy in the two different spots with the same underground atmosphere described above) and documentary footage with voice-overs by the protagonists and a narrator that frame the story in the present perfect tense. The included footage that features Banksy gives a further idea of the impression that is intended to give of him: in one, he shows Guetta a box full of forged bank notes with the face of Diana replacing Elizabeth's, intended to distribute among festival-goers. The inclusion of this project reinforces Banksy's public image circling around anarchy and activism, deluded with a healthy dose

¹² Official trailer, included on the DVD.

¹³ Thierry Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 27 min.

of entertainment. Another scene documents Banksy's action in Disneyland, where he places a puppet wearing Guantanamo prisoner clothes inside one of the attractions. The inclusion of this footage, allegedly filmed by Guetta, relates to Banksy's public image of anti-authoritarian. In the portrait scenes he comments on the events in the film, sometimes with a personal touch. But mostly, it is the story of Guetta getting mixed up in the street art scene, and at a more abstract level, Guetta becoming a means to critique it.

Guetta is said to have discovered street art in 1999, when visiting his cousin in Paris who appears to be the well-known street artist Space Invader. As if infected, Guetta starts documenting the entire street art scene, neglecting his family. One by one, he visits and films various artists, some of whom the spectator gets to see footage of. Banksy explains how Guetta was there at the right place at the right time, as street art is a volatile art form that needs documentation in order to have any life span.¹⁴ While he does not mention the importance of international web-based visibility (which became popular around the time of the scenes' presumed recording, providing the artists with a profitable reason to have a documentalist), he does throw light on a confusing situation. Without mentioning it, Banksy brings the improbability to the attention that activities as illegal as graffiti and street art, including the responsible faces, are being caught on tape by someone the artists in question barely know, but are thankful for nonetheless. Certainly, they could have found a more sensible cameraman. This adds to his staged role a sense of naivety, of a goodish person who did not know what he was getting mixed up in. But with Banksy's public image as a prankster in the back of one's mind, the narrator as well as the narrative itself are established as unreliable early on in the film. An extra layer is added to Banksy's strategic narrative-level character.

Ellsworth-Jones gives a clue for the real reason Guetta has been able to get his foot in the door of the street art world as after some patience even Banksy accepts him. According to the street artist Ron English, Guetta is part of a wealthy French family who acquired a large amount of real estate in Los Angeles in order to obtain permanent residency in the USA.¹⁵ Guetta seems to have been attractive to street artists because he not only knew many good walls in the city, he also owned them, and so could provide legal painting spots.

5.3 Shepard Fairey

The film's third star is Shepard Fairey (real name), of international fame for his Obama-Hope poster designs. Here, he enjoys a rock star-like introduction, which seems slightly satirical of his public image.¹⁶ (fig. 5.5) One of the most successful street art figures around, Fairey is well-known for his trendy and commercially successful clothing brand Obey ("Manufacturing Quality Dissent Since 1989"), which flirts with all commonplaces of the street art culture, reminiscent of the ways MTV and other youngster-targeting brands are appropriating motifs of graffiti, street art, alternative music and other counter-cultural sources, as a watered-down present day equivalent of Radical Chic, where associating oneself with 'tame primitives' has become a universally valid social fashion.¹⁷ The rock guitar theme that accompanies Fairey's introduction seems to establish him as a combination of alternative subcultures and spectacle, but can also be read as a wink to aforementioned forms of appropriation, a wink that suggests interpreting them as transparent and decorative. In interview

¹⁴ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 11 min50.

¹⁵ Ellsworth-Jones, op. cit. (2012), pp. 271-2.

¹⁶ *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 13min20.

¹⁷ Radical Chic is a term coined by Tom Wolfe in his eponymous 1970 essay. *Michael Bracewell* has recapitulated the concept as follows: "For in its purest form, as defined by Wolfe, Radical Chic is an exercise in double-tracking one's public image: on the one hand, defining oneself through committed allegiance to a radical cause, but on the other, vitally, demonstrating this allegiance because it is the fashionable, au courant way to be seen in moneyed, name-conscious Society." Michael Bracewell, 'Molotov Cocktails', *Frieze*, 11 November 2004. Accessed through: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/molotov_cocktails, on 8 June 2014.

scenes, Fairey himself comes across as perfectly reasonable and human. This impression certainly benefits from his undisguised and casual appearance in a domestic setting, a home study with street art books line up behind his head. Fairey is staged as ‘normal’, accessible, and reliable, reinforcing the suggestion that *Exit* is indeed a documentary film. In his review of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* however, Nick Schager called Fairey a “viral marketing campaign creator”, which indicates that something else than transparency and directness may be expected from him. Fairey is from Los Angeles as well, and says he took Thierry along frequently when going out to work. Documentary footage, apparently shot by Thierry, supports this.

5.4 “Now is the time to get your film out”

Banksy’s successful show *Barely Legal* (Los Angeles, 2006) was one of the catalysts in making street art a popular phenomenon, the film argues. Indeed, the organization went to great lengths to make sure the show was a success. Ellsworth Jones, for example, states that “As usual the show was announced only at the last minute, unless you were a celebrity invited to the first-night preview.”¹⁸ Indeed, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* shows Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, with the voice-over stating that half of Hollywood was present (fig. 5.6). While subsequent footage of successful auction sessions selling Banksy and other street artists’ work sets the tone, the narrators voice states that “*Barely Legal* marked the point when street art was forced into the spotlight [...] In the months that followed, prices for work by leading street artists rocketed, with collectors rushing to get in on this exciting new market.”¹⁹ *Exit Through the Gift Shop* never hides Banksy’s close relationship to hypes and commercial success. But Banksy explains to have realized that it was time to show the world “the real story of what this art is about. It’s not about the hype. It’s not about the money.”²⁰ Having recorded many street art figures, including Banksy, for years, it becomes Guetta’s job to bring the movement in broad daylight. Although he always filmed he never organised his tapes, and the film he eventually made together with an editor is hilariously unwatchable. The snippets the spectator gets to see of it contains more white noise than street art.²¹ As it turns out, Guetta is not exactly the filmmaker he claimed to be. He is only capturing, never watching, living his life behind a lens. He only takes and does not create anything. Thierry is very much an agent, affecting his family life and creating expectations from the artists he films, but he does not produce anything, adds no value: he is rather a parasitic agent. On a more abstract level, Thierry can be seen as the personification of the visually literate, pasturing images of pop culture, identifying himself with and through all those tropes, happy to be body-billboarding brand logos and others’ identities.

5.5 Creating Mr. Brainwash

When Banksy asks Guetta for the valuable tapes to give it a try ‘himself’ and sends him off with the suggestion to work on his own hesitant street art practice and put a show together, the film turns around. In the second half of the film, Guetta’s blurry bank of retinal impressions, traces and one-liners explodes. Idolizing Banksy, he takes the suggestion far more seriously than it seems to have been intended. He adapts a new identity by the name of Mr. Brainwash, and starts preparing a show of epic proportions. He remortgages his house and hires a team of twelve studio assistants.²² This marks a

¹⁸ Ellsworth-Jones, op. cit. (2012), p. 136.

¹⁹ Narrator in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 50min15.

²⁰ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 51min50.

²¹ *Life Remote Control* is credited as if it were a finalized, autonomously existing film, but as it remains unreleased to date this does not convince entirely. Snippets can be seen in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* from 53min50 to 54min28, from 54min45 to 5min14, and from 55min33 to 55min43.

²² Matilda Battersby, ‘Mr. Brainwash: Banksy’s street art protegee and his latest brainwave’, in: *The Independent*, accessed through: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/mr-brainwash-banksys-streetart-protog-and-his-latest-brainwave-8001407.html> on 4 August, 2014.

turn in the narrative which renders the potential mockumentary a potential ‘prankumentary’²³ as the documented events now start to produce a reality: the documentation may be manipulated and containing staging and enactments, still Mr. Brainwash has made an actual practice and exhibition independent of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*.

Guetta stops recording, and starts being recorded by an invisible camera crew – which is a convention of the documentary genre that Banksy conveniently appropriates. If Guetta first recorded his life and later street art, in his capacity of the Mr. Brainwash alter ego he reproduces it, in the sense of appropriating and modifying existing images and works of art. The monstrum starts creating, cross-breeding body parts of decapitated icons, multiplying like hallucinations the hastily harvested visual horizon. He does not change appearance. He does not have to, as his idiosyncrasies are already striking enough as they are in order to instrumentalize them for his newly developed identity.

If Banksy’s public persona and popularity developed over various years and are maintained by a combination of his well-oiled secrecy apparatus and the public’s wishful believing, Mr. Brainwash’ reputation skyrocketed, fuelled by a highly inflammable chemical compound. One of *Exit*’s qualities is that it documents the creation of a persona from up close. Mr. Brainwash’ first work, a prelude to the actual transformation, is a transparent sticker with his self-portrait holding a camera, executed in a style mimicking a stencilled graffiti piece (fig. 5.7). Guetta explains that it is intended to look like one, hence the transparent background, so that the portrait seems to be executed directly on the support surface. He is inspired by Fairey’s method of creating importance through visibility (“The more stickers are out there the more important it seems, the more important it seems, the more the people want to know what it is, the more they ask each other. It gains real power from perceived power”²⁴). While stickers are an efficient way of distributing the image quickly, Thierry also makes posters with the same image on a huge scale, making sure that they are seen when passed by. This work already contains many foreshadows of Mr. Brainwash practice. It appropriates an iconic style to gain access to the street art world, it is produced as a sticker to bypass the necessary skills that usually belong to this style and scene, and it objectifies self-centeredness as it portrays the gesture of filming, constitutive of Guetta’s perceived identity: the way he had become known to be like, as everyone who knew him, knew him like that. This seems congruent with Jung’s Schopenhauerian notion of persona as “how one appears to oneself and the world, but not what one is”,²⁵ of course emphasising only that it remains unclear whether there is much to be found beyond the appearance (although a Freudian lecture of Guetta, in regard of his mother-trauma, might be interesting).

Where Guetta first limited his petty street art production to self-portraits-with-video-camera in different formats, in his capacity of Mr. Brainwash he appropriates methods as known from Andy Warhol’s Factory, working with a full-time staff who execute his ideas. Different crewmembers are interviewed, and some of them explain his working process. He browses overview books of modern and contemporary art history, he taking notes “in fairly bad English”, and orders his graphic designers and other artists to make certain combinations and apply certain effects. Anticipating (out of the blue) any criticism of not making his art himself, Guetta mentions Damien Hirst as “one of the most expensive artists of our generation”²⁶ who would have a hundred people from him, and surely does not do fine handicraft work. “I’m not going to make it. I’m just going to come with the idea and say, this is what I want. And I want this, like that.”²⁷ He relies heavily on the references he evokes with his

²³ Jeannette Catsoulis, ‘On the Street, at the Corner of Art and Trash’, *The New York Times*, 16 April 2010. The last lines of the review read: “[...] ‘Exit’ could be a new subgenre: the prankumentary. Audiences, however, would be advised simply to enjoy the film on its face — even if that face is a carefully contrived mask.” Accessed through: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/16/movies/16exit.html>, on 2 June 2014.

²⁴ Shepard Fairey in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 18min.

²⁵ Jung, op. cit. (1971), p. 218.

²⁶ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 58min50.

²⁷ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 59min10.

images: the mixture of celebrities, art-historical references (notably Warhol), well-known cartoon figures, and other pop-cultural tropes make him fit seamlessly in the visual idiom of the street art hype that he is venturing into at the right moment. It results in a practice creating large numbers of rather derivative, sometimes poorly executed objects. Mr. Brainwash associates himself with and positions his persona in relation to street art as well as to pop art. When someone asks him why the ‘Campbell Tomato Spray Paint’ image recurs so often, he answers: ‘I think it’s part of the popular culture. Andy Warhol is passed away. And I’m here.’²⁸ Warhol may be an obvious influence, the work is especially inspired by Banksy, with which the resemblances are close and frequent.

The mannerism that characterizes Mr. Brainwash’ work is especially well captured by the way he uses the same approaches and tricks to modify different source images. The bar code look for example, that can be applied like a visual effect in Photoshop and similar software, is used to stylize both *Mona Lisa* (fig. 5.8) and an image of Miles Davis (fig. 5.9) as well as a photo of Madonna kissing Britney Spears at the 2003 MTV Awards (fig. 5.10). The use of the bar code could have been a parody of pop culture that flirts with political awareness as a selling point, reminding again of Radical Chic, but Mr. Brainwash seems oblivious of that phenomenon: ‘When you’re really close to it, you just see lines. Any kind of people, they come to the market, and they see bar code. They live with it. They’re brainwashed. That’s why I called myself Mr. Brainwash. It’s because everything I do, somewhere brainwashes your face.’²⁹

One of the most obvious acts of image building is the changing of a name. Mr. Brainwash’ moniker refers to a state in which one does not think for himself. Instead, one has submitted to an ideological figure or site that thinks on his behalf. Who is brainwashed has become inferior. He has motivated his pseudonym, apart from the more trivial quotation cited above, more explicitly as follows: ‘I came up with the idea that the whole movement of art is all about brainwashing. Obey is about brainwashing. Banksy is about brainwashing. So I use ‘MBW’ and I *am* Mr. Brainwash.’³⁰ Indeed it could be argued that Fairey’s and Banksy’s work raises awareness about the brainwashing effects of society. In Mr. Brainwash’ case it is straight out ironic: Guetta was brainwashed first by his camera, resulting in mindless filming whatever happened in front of him, then by street art, ceasing to take care of his family in order to be with the artists he idolized, and finally embracing this state of mindlessness, not only baptizing himself with it but also brainwashing the public with a hype around derivative work.

5.6 Life is Beautiful

The production has one distinct goal: to obey Banksy’s ‘direct order’ to make a show. Mr. Brainwash hired extra artists and props-builders to help him dress up an abandoned Hollywood CBS studio as a large exhibition space. He hired a promoter too, and seems to spend most of his own time on creating a hype. He has endorsements by Banksy and Fairey printed on huge canvasses (fig. 5.11), he gets *LA Weekly* to do a cover story on his show, and tries to attract visitors by promising the first two hundred people to turn up a free unique screen print.

When everything starts to fall behind schedule because Mr. Brainwash concentrates on creating a buzz while leaving the work to his crew, the customizing of two hundred prints becomes a problem. This is resolved in an absurd scene, with Mr. Brainwash riding in a wheelchair along the prints spread out on the floor while spraying a single line of aerosol paint on top of them so that each one is ‘different’. This act emphasizes the already heavy atmosphere of laying his authenticity on the table.

²⁸ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 1h17min38.

²⁹ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 1h00min25.

³⁰ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 57min21.

Mr. Brainwash' name is also reflected in the success of his hype campaign, which seems to be aimed completely at creating belief that something great will come. As Mauss has argued in discussing non-Western conceptions of personhood, names often indicated not so much an individual, rather they supported and produced personae, roles and functions within a community. Moreover, when a function changed, a name may have had to change.³¹ Similarly, creating a hype in Western communities certainly is easier with an iconic trademark name. Banksy's and Fairey's celebrity names written under their endorsements of Mr. Brainwash as fixed to the facade of the show's location suggest as much.

The hype pays off and the June 2008 show titled *Life is Beautiful* attracts more than 7.000 people who do not really know the work or the artists at all yet.³² The show is a major commercial success, catapulting Mr. Brainwash' fame. In the final scenes of the film, Banksy and Fairey are distancing themselves from Mr. Brainwash and his project, characterizing it as meaningless (Banksy)³³ and premature (Fairey)³⁴. The discomfort one feels when watching their reactions seems to stem from a combination of a discrepancy in artistic views and a mild case of envy, and recalls the "moral in there somewhere" Banksy mentioned in the opening scene.³⁵ His disappointment about the practice of Mr. Brainwash, around which his entire film pivots, gives a sense of the critical aims of the film. "He is kind of the rightful heir to Andy Warhol in a way. Andy Warhol made a statement by repeating famous icons until they became meaningless, but he was extremely iconic in the way that he did it. But then Thierry *really* made them meaningless."³⁶ This is a lecture of Warhol's work telling of Banksy's aesthetics, pointing at the critical potential of repetition and being iconic. Although he could not mention Warhol's name without sneering, Banksy's suggestion that Warhol demonstrated fame to be meaningless attributes to Warhol the potential of democratization and inflation of fame through the use of stylized images. One could speculate that Banksy projects his own aesthetic position (of making art that attempts to speak directly to the people and make them think differently, 'brainwash', perhaps) on Warhol's praxis. In Banksy's case, this positions Warhol's influence on the same level of the legacy of graffiti as a praxis of repetition, to which Banksy added the appropriation of the iconic visual style of stencilling. His criticism at Mr. Brainwash' address in this respect, then, is that the latter appropriated the style of Warhol – as well as of his own, and of many sources from popular culture, arguably – purely as a surface, without adding anything.

But when observing the edit of these scenes, the tendency of the critique goes much further. Everything, notably Mr. Brainwash' statements, is framed as commercial and unauthentic. The disputable commercialism was already prefigured by Guetta earning lots of money with second hand clothes, reframing them as 'designer's' and adding value on basis of almost nothing. Since it is equally easy to have success without own ideas or skills in the art world, as *Exit Through the Gift Shop* demonstrates, this former occupation prefigures Thierry's transformation of a personification of a general superficiality and routinely unmotivated acceptance into the persona of Mr. Brainwash, a commercial artist who inherits those traits. The questioning of Guetta's/Mr. Brainwash' identity, ubiquitous since the film came out, seems to have been a reason for making the film in the first place. Still, the question whether Mr. Brainwash is 'real' or not has not stopped collectors from buying his

³¹ Mauss, many examples throughout the essay. For the change of names, see Mauss, op. cit. (1938), p. 9.

³² Matilda Battersby, op. cit. (2010), np.

³³ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*: "Andy Warhol made a statement by repeating famous icons until they became meaningless, but he was extremely iconic in the way that he did it. But then Thierry *really* made them meaningless." 1h19min12.

³⁴ Shepard Fairey in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*: "How do I feel about being partially responsible for creating Mr. Brainwash? I feel like, ehm, I had the best intentions. I think even when you have the best intentions sometimes things can go awry. To put a huge body of work together and sort of try to come out as if he is a fully formed artist ready for the world stage I think was a little premature." 1h19min30.

³⁵ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*: "I don't know what it means, Thierry is huge success and a rival in the art world. I mean, maybe, Thierry was a genius all along. Maybe, he got a bit lucky. Maybe, it means art is a bit of a joke." 1h21min17.

³⁶ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 1h19min12.

work for significant sums, and gave his lack of identity a real underpinning. Ironically, addressing this theme is one of the film's main preoccupations. However obvious the deception, people buy all of this, the film seems to say.

The irony of Mr. Brainwash lies in him existing and proliferating as a natural artist while the reality of that very existence is doubted. It becomes obvious, then, that his pseudonym may serve mainly to reflect this irony: Mr. Brainwash may appear brainwashed himself, but asserts all the more of people's tendency to somehow like being brainwashed. The effectiveness of the personification as a whole, then, seems too good to be true.³⁷

5.7 The scheme unveiled

Much has been written on the possibility of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* being a mockumentary, a fake, staged concept where Mr. Brainwash is an actor, directed by Banksy and/or Shepard Fairey.³⁸ Will Ellsworth-Jones makes a good case in demonstrating that the core of the film is true. Having met a range of people who have worked on the show, know Guetta or are not directly related to anything that has to do with the film, he shows it is plausible that Thierry's past is more or less real.³⁹ However, Banksy is such an unreliable source, known for witty practical jokes that it makes sense to suppose that any statement, even when not officially by 'Banksy' could be part of the conundrum. The film's unresolved ambiguity is partly explained by the target audience. Arguably, Banksy's aesthetics include puzzling the average street art consumer up until the point of insatiable fascination. But right before the 2011 Academy Awards, *Los Angeles Times* tracked Guetta down. On basis of public records and accounts of past and present friends, employees and business partners, Jason Felch finds his entire biography as laid out in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is true.⁴⁰ But he hurries to admit that nothing is sure regarding Mr. Brainwash. That seems true. How does the film use him?

Exit Through the Gift Shop's editing is extremely important because it veils and remains relatively invisible. Yet simply by asking 'who is filming this?' the spectator gets an insight in the authenticity of the film and the acting involved. The narrative makes quite explicit that Mr. Brainwash' success was unforeseen and undesired by Banksy and Fairey.⁴¹ But when the film follows Mr. Brainwash setting up his art practice, cameras are there to register all his moves. While there is a lot of attention for Guetta's camera addiction in the first part of the film, there is no mentioning of him hiring a film crew to do his habitual filming for him so that he could concentrate on his art. This concealment blatantly suggests that it is a film crew related to the present film, a Banksy-directed crew, that records all this. Ellsworth-Jones asserts that *Life is Beautiful* was produced by the same producer of Banksy's exhibition *Barely Legal* two years before in Los Angeles, Daniel Salin (who is not mentioned in the film, another instance of concealment), suggesting that Banksy was at the core of the project. Jamie D'Cruz, one of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*'s producers, said: "To make a film about something as obscure as street art you need the guy. You need the character. Thierry was a brilliant cipher through

³⁷ This is recognized by critics. See for instance: Nick Schager, 'Exit Through the Gift Shop', *Slant Magazine*, April 12, 2010, accessed through: <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/exit-through-the-gift-shop>, on 3 August 2014.

³⁸ Fairly each review has considered this. For instance: Battersby, op. cit. (2010), Anthony, op. cit. (2014), Catsoulis, op. cit. (2010).

³⁹ Ellsworth-Jones, op. cit. (2012), pp. 269-283.

⁴⁰ Jason Felch, 'Getting at the truth of Exit Through the Gift Shop', *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2011. Accessed through: <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2011/feb/22/entertainment/la-et-oscar-exit-20110222>, on 4 June 2014.

⁴¹ For example, when Banksy explains that he had meant his encouragement to Guetta only on a small scale: "I needed him out of the way, so I said: why don't you go do some more of your posters, make some art, you know. Have a little show. Invite a few people, get some bottles of wine." (55min50) And '6 months later', the narrator brings the spectator up to speed: "When Banksy had suggested to Thierry that he make some art, he could have never imagined how far things would go. Thierry had now remortgaged his business, and sold off whatever he could to invest in a huge studio, screen printing equipment, and a full time staff, capable of producing MBW pieces on a commercial scale." (58min20)

which you can get into a world which is actually quite dull in many ways.”⁴² It seems then, that Banksy scripted, or at least already foresaw, the potential of Guetta’s transformation in the street art persona Mr. Brainwash. But the most convincing statement comes from Banksy. In an e-mail interview he said about Guetta: “I needed the film to be fronted by a personality the audience could engage with.”⁴³ A last example of concealing is the inclusion of a section in the end credits with short descriptions of the protagonists’ ‘current’ activities – not so much a convention of the documentary genre as one of Hollywood films ‘based on true events’. Banksy’s line states: “Banksy will never again help anyone make a documentary about street art”, as if the makers themselves started to be confused about the plot.

Mr. Brainwash’ art practice, therefore, could be considered to be conceived at least partly by Banksy. And if he as well as his crew is part of the scheme, this almost certainly implies that Mr. Brainwash is an enactment. By way of agreement they do not discuss this, even if he wilfully subordinates himself to the tendency of Banksy’s critique of the commercial potential of street art. At the same time, Banksy’s involvement in Mr. Brainwash makes the latter’s conviction that his art practice is serious and worthwhile suggestive of the possibility that not only the general public is watching a ‘prankumentary’, but that he is its oblivious victim rather than its lynchpin. This rather strong possibility of a scheme reinforces the notion of Banksy enacting a strategic character that feigns, suggests and veils the so-called documentary background in order to demonstrate Mr. Brainwash’ (and street art’s) weaknesses. What does this imply for Mr. Brainwash’ mode of performance?

The probability of a scheme implies that an ambiguity is added to Guetta’s already weird and hard-to-believe behaviour. Although Ellsworth-Jones makes a convincing case that the way Guetta is depicted is authentic, the circumstance that Banksy’s performance persona enacts a strategic character for the sake of the narrative makes it even more thinkable that also Mr. Brainwash is secretly up to something. For example, when asserting that “I feel good. I feel good as a Artist, to have a reputation, now. You know, an artist is not a guy that you see in one show and you can decide who it is or if he copies Banksy or if he copies Shepard Fairey or if he copies... It is about time. You’ll see in the time who I will be. Because, with time you will see my creativity. You will see if I am a real artist or not.”⁴⁴

Mr. Brainwash’ performance is not only an enactment, but as Guetta’s natural self is more or less remained intact, he also a reflection of conditions of the street art world functions as emblem of performative operations that affect Banksy’s work. It seems sufficiently clear that Guetta and Mr. Brainwash, as perfect antipodes to Banksy, are used as a form of delegated performance. The way “the audience could engage with” them likely has to do with the fact that they represent a superficial Other that hard core street art adepts would call sell-outs. In that respect, it makes perfect sense if also the name Mr. Brainwash was invented by Banksy.

5.8 Personae and critique reconsidered

When systematically reconstructing Mr. Brainwash’ persona, Mauss immediately comes to mind. There is a strong convergence of natural identity and artificiality in the sense that he changed his name in order to obtain a new identity, and started to work as an artist apparently with the help of others that is concealed in the narrative of the film, but in essence seems to remain the same individual. On one hand this artificiality appears as an activity rather than an act. In that respect, his vocation as initiated

⁴² Jamie D’Cruz cited in Ellsworth-Jones, op. cit. (2012), p. 277.

⁴³ Banksy in an email interview with AJ Schnack, ‘Banksy (Yes, Banksy) on Thierry, EXIT Skepticism & Documentary Filmmaking as Punk’, blog: *All These Wonderful Things*, accessed through: <http://edendale.typepad.com/weblog/2010/12/banksy-yes-banksy-on-thierry-exit-skepticism-documentary-filmmaking-as-punk.html>, on 4 June, 2014.

⁴⁴ Guetta in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 1h20min11.

by Banksy's call that he misunderstood as "become a street artist", points to Jung's notion of the *professional persona* as well as Daston and Sibum's transformative figure: a recognisable public image that the subject desires to subscribe to, and in a way become. Guetta badly wanted to *be* a street artist. If one looks at his art, it could even be assumed he wanted to be Warhol and Banksy. On the other hand, Mr. Brainwash' indeterminacy enables the possibility of an actual theatrical enactment, which Mauss does not explicate. So the structure of this Maussian persona remains opaque, and in that sense, Mr. Brainwash' role is too theatrically compromised to consider him a literal instance of Jung's and Daston and Sibum's abovementioned concepts.

Also Rosenthal's notion of "fabrication that corresponds to what you want to project from within yourself"⁴⁵ rings true, although that projection may be attended to less by Guetta himself than by Banksy and Fairey, and maybe even D'Cruz, when one thinks back of the latter's assertion that one "needs the character" to perform a story on street art. Mr. Brainwash may seem confident, but he does not convince as an artist, maybe because "It is you and yet not you – a part of you but not the whole. It is not a lie but neither the full truth"⁴⁶ – it is simply too plausible that he is the product of a hype instigated by Banksy and Fairey, and possibly others. Mr. Brainwash' artishood, also if candid, depends more than anything on what could perfectly be called a Maussian public persona constructed by Banksy and co, and seemingly artificially enacted around a more natural identity. Curiously, parallels can also be drawn to Mauss' mentioning of the Roman *cognomen* and *imago*: Guetta has related and almost dedicated his Mr. Brainwash' name to the core interests of his respected spiritual fathers as if it were a honorary and inherited pseudonym (maybe they indeed *gave* it to him), and his practice could easily be considered a mould of the appearance, the wax mask, of the same precursors.

In Auslander's terms, it seems possible to designate the entire presence of Guetta as a performance persona, with Mr. Brainwash as a sort of song character. The reason this may feel slightly counterintuitive is of course shaped by the impossibility to tell 'public' from 'performance' modes here. Guetta did not change so much, nor does he change back. Mr. Brainwash can be seen as a layer covering Guetta that is transparent but does never leave.⁴⁷ The difficulty in relating Mr. Brainwash to Auslander's performance persona (which has been easy in the case of the other discussed personae) has to do with the fact that the exact mode of performance is not clear. This ambiguity remains: a large part of the footage in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* maintains a strong sense of candid documentation, and yet the documentation of public appearances seems like unconscious or unconscious performance.

Since Guetta does not position himself critically to any of his or other's actions, it is safe to say that a Brechtian demonstrative actorship does not apply. On a different level, there is a very Brechtian act implied by Mr. Brainwash, to which I will return when discussing Banksy's persona.

Thinking back of Buchloh's mentioning of Beuys' transformation into a public persona, it is easy to see that Mr. Brainwash' artistry fully depends on his public persona created as "a travesty of the role" (to echo Buchloh's words) of a pop artist or street artist, a popularly acclaimed figure who makes art that is accessible for all.

Like Schlingensief's asylum seeker personae, who derived their critical potential not from demonstration but from their susceptibility to interpretation à volonté as well as from any

⁴⁵ Rosenthal cited in Lampe, op. cit. (2002), pp. 296-7.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Auslander, op. cit. (2004), p. 7: "Bowie has constructed a number of other identities for himself over the course of his career, many of which have names of their own: Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, The Thin White Duke, etc. It is not entirely clear whether it makes most sense to see these named entities as *characters* Bowie plays and the Bowie identity as the *persona* that remains constant across these representations, or to see them as transformations of the Bowie persona itself. Because Ziggy Stardust and the others figure primarily as characters in songs, and also because the Bowie persona is that of a performer who can transform himself completely at a moment's notice, I would argue for the former analysis, though the other argument is credible." This would support interpreting Mr. Brainwash and Guetta as two different personae.

Selbstprovokation by the public, Mr. Brainwash testifies to the possibility that a persona's critical indeterminacy can outlaw his or her actions and image. This allows over-identification of perverse phenomena – or the appropriation of commonplaces in general – to constitute the risk of inverting Butler's reading of Foucault's *critique* as the questioning "how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles"⁴⁸ into *propaganda* as suggesting how one could be governed and make its 'principles' appear attractive. Titles and names are especially striking in this respect. The name of Faurey's clothing brand Obey, for example, seems to glorify authority itself and attack (or mock) it at the same time. *Exit Through the Gift Shop*'s title, too, suggests a deterring *exemplum* in a critique of the commercial dimensions of art, but never quite manages to avoid overtones of hypocrisy. But Mr. Brainwash especially embodies such faux criticality. Although he explicitly relates of his awareness of the way we are "living in barcodes" his almost perverse commercialism is toothless.

Both Guetta and Mr. Brainwash also testify of social conditions, or at least tendencies, that are thematically central to the critique of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. The superficiality, commerciality and lack of authenticity of the persona and the character seem symbolical, all the more so as these are themes that Banksy deals with. Works as the forged Lady Diana bank notes discussed above or *I Can't Believe You Morons Actually Buy This Shit* (fig. 5.12) both circle around such notions. Guetta and Mr. Brainwash could be considered to reflect the performative effects especially of commerciality, notably in the arts. Guetta can be considered a symbol of vacuous and unreflective registration of reality, Mr. Brainwash one of mindless and habitual reproduction. As filming turns into being filmed, Guetta becomes worth of reproduction. In the film Mr. Brainwash can be considered to *be* a reproduction of Banksy. Thus, Guetta seems to embody Mr. Brainwash as a delegated performance with which Banksy can demonstrate the problems surrounding certain conditions in the (street) art world.

The provisional reading of Banksy's persona as offered above demands a reinterpretation. What we witness as Banksy is a performance persona in Auslander's mode, enacting a character that informs the film's narrative. It critically discusses the depicted events, be they documentary or staged. They are certainly heavily edited to be the direct object of the film's criticism. What I referred to above as Banksy's strategic, narrative-based character, a mask that stands apart from his staging as street art persona, should actually be seen on the level of the film as a whole: a mask performing the direct critical narrative, hiding his continuous involvement and very probably even instigation of the entire practice. If *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is a critique, it is very much a practice. But this structure, however interesting on the level of characterization, is not the real critique at play.

Banksy's persona is also the representation of the creators of the present film and of the creation of Mr. Brainwash, the artist persona with whom authenticity and commercialism in the art world is questioned. But his explanation that the anticipated street art documentary by Guetta was necessary to show the world "the real story of what this art is about. It's not about the hype. It's not about the money", sounded unreliable already in 2010.⁴⁹ Banksy has been running his online store Pictures on Walls selling his art since 2004.⁵⁰ Will Ellsworth-Jones shows that Banksy had been building his image and fame through hyped events. His 2008 exhibition *Barely Legal*, for instance, was "all valet parking and limos and Hollywood royalty" and allegedly brought him £3 million and American fame, but also established an almost commonplace relation to Angelina Jolie, Brat Pitt, and

⁴⁸ Butler, op. cit. (2001), np.

⁴⁹ Banksy in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, 51 min50.

⁵⁰ Ellsworth Jones, op. cit. (2012), p. 169.

Christina Aguilera buying his work.⁵¹ In the *New Yorker*, critic Anthony Lane said *Exit Through the Gift Shop* “feels dangerously close to the promotion of a cult – almost, dare one say it, of a brand.”⁵²

It is possible that Banksy’s dismissal of vacuous commercialism is honest and sound, and that his way of generating hypes around his work has to do with visibility rather than with money. Still, hype and commerce go hand in hand. One of the curious circumstances in the reception of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is that recognising that it is fairly admmissive of Banksy’s participation in commercial art production is not a standard aspect of analysis, to say the least. Certainly, using Mr. Brainwash as a target for a commercial mentality is more prominent, but Banksy constantly evokes suspicion as to his share in this. The large, commercial scale of the production and distribution itself, the hype of *Barely Legal* that the film clearly shows and the subsequent success of Banksy’s work as a commodity of which he does not pose as a victim, and Mr. Brainwash as a grotesque copy of Banksy essentially doing the same things, are overt examples. In other words, Banksy’s complicity in what *Exit Through the Gift Shop* criticizes is never hidden, rather it is pushed to the point where it is impossible not to speculate the he is the actual elephant in the room, explicated up to the point of immediate recognition, but implicit and still not recognized. *Exit Through the Gift Shop*’s modus operandi, then, could be described as revealing through concealing.

5.9 Conclusion

Mr. Brainwash’ complacency, derivative practice, and various layers of manipulation on behalf of the narrative and the edit demonstrate that a pop-cultural project involving the creation of Mr. Brainwash as well as *Exit Through the Gift Shop* itself can be a complex instrument to analyse and corrupt the creation and reception of art, street artists, and identities in general. On a thematic level, the film frames an alleged clash between street art’s traditional notions (as an evolution from the graffiti movement it presupposes authenticity, anti-authoritarianism, competition for visibility and, as an art form, creativity, originality and artistic skill) and the wave of commercial opportunities, practices and applications that rendered street art mainstream as a style, as a trope, as a ‘culture’. Banksy and Thierry/Mr. Brainwash personify the thesis and the antithesis in a dialectics of street art. Together they form a more convincing representation of the different contradictory characteristics of the street art scene.

When observing the dynamics between the narrative unrolling Guetta’s life story and Banksy commenting on it, it is worthwhile to think of the Brechtian epic actor demonstrating a social awareness while he enacts a character. Obviously, Guetta is not an enactment by Banksy, but they represent, through internalized roles and the external sign system of staging, two sides of the same coin, enabling one to understand both of them better but also to understand their common context and background.

Exit Through the Gift Shop as a whole then, could be said to be a critique of the fundamentals of street art. It questions both the romantic streetwise qualities of the genre as derived from the graffiti tradition and the opportunistic commercialism through which it has gained its recent popularity. It questions street art’s power on its discourses of truth (to echo Foucault’s “question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth”⁵³). The film presents a commentary on pop-cultural social mechanisms and modes of creation through the intermediaries of its lead personae. For the issues it raises, it does not really matter whether *Exit Through the Gift Shop* documents staged or natural events; or rather, it is beside the point: the film and its project demonstrate that even though it is uncertain whether something is real, it can become a reality by gaining a following, experiencing

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 132-133.

⁵² Anthony Lane, ‘Street Justice’, *The New Yorker*, April 26 2010. Accessed through: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/04/26/street-justice>, on 5 June 2014.

⁵³ Butler, op. cit. (2001), n.p.

commercial success, and proliferating its activities.

Exit Through the Gift Shop is a film that encapsulates all three modes of performance as explicated in the theoretical framework. In this case they can be more precisely be identified as the enactment of characters, the conscious and unconscious embodiment of social and public roles, and the presentation of subjects and phenomena as conditioned and scripted by certain ideological and normative conventions. As a documentation, it is opaque. It cannot always be distinguished whether a figure is documented in a natural mode with specific attention for his or her social role and public image, or ‘documented’ enacting that social role and public image as a character. My latter use of ‘documented’ is justified since this happens often in a situation that is part of everyday reality that is unlikely to be staged, directed, and enacted entirely. This relates to the protagonists’ ambiguous naturalness as noted above.