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Film

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Bad Influences, Bad Personalities



Print

Exit Through the Gift Shop

What begins as an interesting documentary about how Banksy and other famous graffiti artists make their art soon turns into a semi-mockumentary that plays into people's desire to believe the art world is too easily manipulated and therefore something they don't have to pay attention to; that, in fact, they would be idiots to pay any attention to it at all. What they should pay attention to is Banksy, who doesn't credit himself or anybody else as the director of this film, but who appears on-screen to speak to us from the shadows, if that's really him, next to a monkey mask with ping pong balls for eyes.

Much of the film takes place in Los Angeles, which Banksy sees as an art-deprived suburb of Disneyland. When he brings his site-specific op-ed cartooning to a Los Angeles gallery, the film acts like this is a revelation to the locals, who (presumably after years of taking in everything from Ed Ruscha to Raymond Pettibon to Mike Kelley) are easily wowed by a live elephant.

We are told the film was originally meant to be assembled from thousands of hours of footage shot by a kooky Frenchman. The film's rejection of this footage as incoherent and unsalvageable is a normalizing strategy that forces literal meaning on us by finding a regular documentary inside a mess—we are supposed to believe that because of someone else's incompetence, Banksy had no choice but to make something anyone could understand. Banksy's own coy self-definitions, for which he apologizes in a recessive friendly-macho way, pull him into the back of the frame and out of the film. His will to absence makes the monumental daring of his work all the more impressive, especially since it's a pleasant kind of art that brightens the urban landscape and cheers people up.

Chase

Twenty folding chairs in an air-conditioned screening room on a humid night in Chelsea. The artist is present. She is Liz Magic Laser (her real name—the question must come up a lot), here to introduce *Chase*, her two-and-a-half hour film of Bertolt Brecht's *Man Equals Man*, a play first performed in Germany in 1926.

Laser shot *Chase* on digital video in the ATM vestibules of banks in New York City. She worked without permission, gaining access like anyone else would, by swiping a bank card to open the door. In the film, her actors perform next to customers using the ATMs, among security guards and cleaning ladies. The actors declaim Brecht's words while bystanders, a built-in audience, make withdrawals and deposits or wait around. Usually people ignore the actors, but some, roped in, play along for a moment before they leave. Whenever a new customer opens the door, a burst of unmixed sound from the outside world floods in, then the door closes and cuts it off again. One actor, Max Woertendyke, struts and works the crowd like he was born to act in foyers backed by a chorus of beeping machines. At one point, without breaking character, Woertendyke nonchalantly takes a Gummi Bear from a package a bystander is holding and eats it.

Laser gets a lot of good angles in these small spaces no one who isn't homeless or an architect ever thinks about or studies. She does it without resorting to off-kilter framing or wide-angle lenses—the spaces are not distorted or dramatized, and the film is free of production value and art direction. Another of the many strengths of this brilliantly conceived film is how Laser does not have to fuzz-out any of the corporate logos that fill the backgrounds, because this is art for an art gallery, which is granted a freedom the movies and TV don't have and should demand. *Chase* shows us the world as we actually see it, festooned with advertising that isn't product placement.

Each actor performs separately in a different ATM lobby. Laser cuts the film as if they were together, talking across the void of the ATM monitors. (She explained this by mentioning Eisenstein.) Much of the cutting doesn't match, the sound cuts don't match, and some of the acting, like the camerawork, is amateurish. The actors, alone in their vestibules, never quite agree on the pronunciations of certain names, including that of the play's protagonist, Galy Gay. It doesn't matter. *Chase* is one of those rare films that benefits from its flaws and limitations, getting better and more interesting as it goes along.

Brecht's play, which takes place in the northern reaches of a farcical, Kipling-esque India ("where the tiger asks the jaguar about his teeth"), attempts to demonstrate how soldiers are created. The simple raw material of human personality is easily broken down, Brecht says, and it readily adapts to combat and killing. Part of *Man Equals Man* is set near a treasure-filled pagoda, which may have suggested an ATM to Laser. One side effect of having her actors perform opposite ATMs is that we get to see how much money they have in their bank accounts (not much) when they make withdrawals to use cash as a prop. That's not something that happens in *Salt*. Here, the money is on the screen.

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To Have Done with the Contemporary Cinema

Since the 1970s, many people have been used to thinking of the cinema as post-revolutionary, or as an unfinished revolution, or as dragging itself on in a kind of zombie-afterlife pastiche-and-parody mode. [More...](#)

Claire Denis

Denis is especially receptive to three things: human bodies (especially when they are semi-nude, and especially black touching white skin); bodies of water; and transit. [More...](#)

We All Die There Now

In a just world, these relentless references would cost *Kick-Ass* something. Allusion invites comparison, and in every face-off *Kick-Ass* comes out the loser: in fact, as soon as Cage mentioned Woo, I wished I were watching *Face/Off*. [More...](#)

MORE BY A.S. HAMRAH

Jessica Biel's Hand

For two months this summer the only movies I watched were movies about the war on terror. [More...](#)

Say Something in Chinese

Alameda sits on an island in the San Francisco Bay. To me, Alameda is an enchanted place. It is everything you want America to be but never is. When I retire, I'd like to move there and run for mayor. [More...](#)

Political Memories

Here are some things I remember, from being an old person. [More...](#)

RELATED MATERIAL

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Dicking Around

America is a country of overgrown boys, stunted and warped, who, left to their own devices, are fit to do little more than play video games, stare at pornography, and crack jokes about genitals, flatulence, and defecation. [More...](#)

My Life and Times

Kung Fu con un mono

En 1997 yo tenía veinte años y jamás había viajado a algún lugar donde el español no fuese la lengua oficial. [More...](#)

New York

A Bubble in People

I don't think anybody's crying for Jimmy Cayne. Or for John Thain at Merrill... I don't think anybody's crying for him. [More...](#)