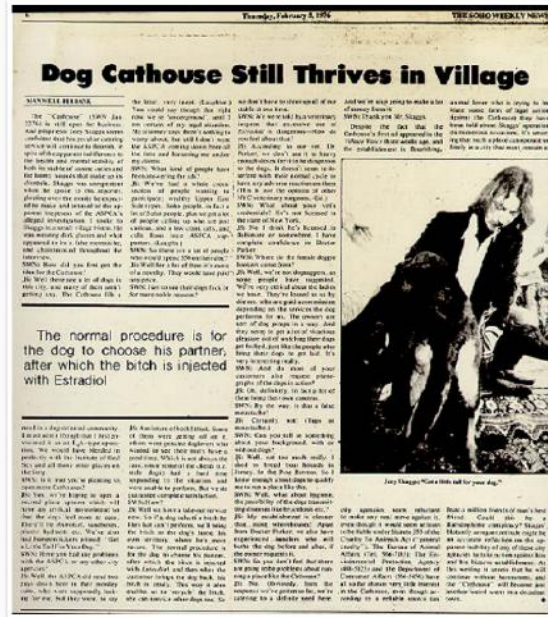


Decade: 2010s Year: 2015 Director: Andrea Marini Country of Origin: Italy, US, United Kingdom

Tags: chill it's just a prank, director interviews, director's first film, documentaries about artists, how media can be foolish, Reminds me of Exit Through the Gift Shop

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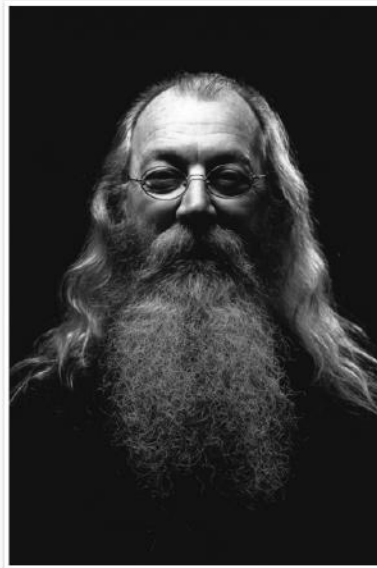
What ART OF THE PRANK reveals about news media, featuring MAKING A MURDERER, PEACE OFFICER, and THE HUNTING GROUND



by Chris Lambert

Do you like the feeling of discovering some new artist that you've never heard of but is actually prolific and fascinating? Well then I have an artist for you.

Joey Skaggs.



Skaggs, born in 1945, a graduate of New York City's School of the Visual Arts, is a performance artist famous for conducting elaborate media hoaxes. For example, in 1976, Skaggs pretended to be the proprietor of a "cathouse for dogs." Yeah, a brothel for dogs. He put an ad in the Village Voice. People thought it was real. Hundreds called him. Multiple news outlets wanted to interview the dog pimp. To keep the hoax alive, Skaggs brought 25 actors and 15 dogs together in a loft and had them act as though they were customers. He had a phony veterinarian on staff to further the hoax. The media ate it up. People freaked out. ABC aired a story about it. Then the ASPCA, Bureau of Animal Affairs, the NYPD vice squad, and the NYC Mayor's office mobilized to shut everything down. The Attorney General sent Skaggs a subpoena.

"On April 1, 1976, in answer to the subpoena, Skaggs called a press conference at the Attorney General's office. He announced it was a conceptual performance piece, that the whole thing was a hoax. He was forced to give and swear to a deposition and the case was dropped.

WABC TV never retracted the story, leaving millions to believe that somewhere in New York City there still exists a bordello for dogs. When asked about this later, the WABC TV producer insisted that Skaggs had said it was a hoax to avoid prosecution, and expressed bitterness because the documentary, which had been nominated for an Emmy Award, had been knocked out of the running."

Skaggs has been doing work like this for 40 years, ranging from cure-all vitamins derived from cockroaches, to celebrity sperm banks, to a computer program that could analyze crime evidence and render a guilty or not guilty verdict, and so much more. It's about time someone made a documentary about him.

Art of the Prank explores Joey Skaggs, the man, the artist. It shows us the impact Skaggs's media hoax art has had on his life, and his reasons for making the art that he makes.

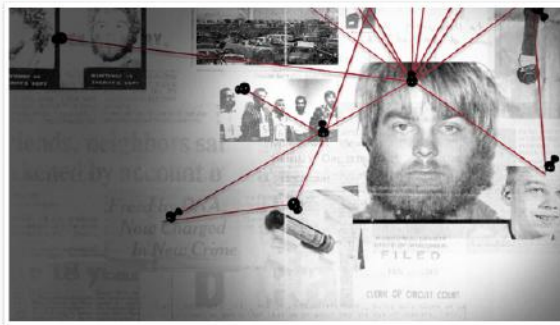
We're shown footage of the hoaxes, given backstory on them, their set-ups, the goal of each hoax, the meaning behind each one, how they went, what happened afterwards, etc.



Watching *Art of the Prank*, it's easy to get caught up in Joey's biography. And, especially, in the details of his media hoaxes. I found myself continuously looking forward to the next hoax, what it would be, how it would be executed, etc. I think it would be really easy to watch *Art of the Prank* only as biography of Joey Skaggs the person and the artist. But there's more going on.

Underlying Joey's story and his pranks is a pretty polite condemnation of the media. In this way, Andrea Marin's *Art of the Prank* shares a similar style to Netflix's *Making a Murderer*.

Making a Murderer is a 10-hour, 10 episode series that details the astounding case of Steven Avery, a man who may have been falsely imprisoned twice. Twice.



The first two episodes detail Steven's early years, the situation regarding his initial imprisonment for a rape he didn't commit, then, 18 years later, his exoneration via new DNA evidence. We get into Avery's pending lawsuit against Manitowoc County, his life after jail. And then the plot takes a turn. Two years after Avery's release, a woman's been murdered and Avery is the main suspect. The remaining eight episodes follow the details surrounding the police work to find out what happened to the victim, Teresa Halbach, then Avery's arrest. The bulk of the show deals with Avery's court case: the pre-trial stuff, the trial, what happened after the trial.

The complication to *Making a Murderer* is that it's not entirely clear what happened to Teresa and whether or not Avery was involved. Every piece of evidence that points to Avery might also point to police framing Avery, the same group of police that framed Avery nearly 20 years earlier.

Making a Murderer has been a huge sensation because everyone comes away asking the same question, "Is Avery guilty or not?" The documentary can't tell us. So many of us have started 2016 by asking one another if we think Avery is or isn't the murderer, and why we think it was or wasn't him, who we think might have done it, etc.

Many people who have watched *Making a Murderer* come away from it thinking the filmmakers, Moira Demos and Mary Manhardt, wanted to show Steven Avery was innocent.

That wasn't their point.

Their point of *Making a Murderer* is to show how fucked up the American judicial system is. How that system can be manipulated. How it can fail to live up to its own ideals of "innocent until proven guilty" and that the prosecution must prove guilt "beyond reasonable doubt".

This misunderstanding occurs because at no point in *Making a Murderer* is there a big speech from the filmmakers, or anyone else, saying, "HEY, LOOK HOW MESSED UP THE COURT SYSTEM IS! THIS HAPPENS ALL OVER THE COUNTRY. IT'S TERRIBLE. WE SHOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT." We have people who express their disbelief about what's happening. But there's no direct statements that clarify the main points.

Contrary to *Making a Murderer*'s style, we have *Peace Officer* and *The Hunting Ground*. Both give us expert testimony that condemn their subjects.

In *Peace Officer*, it's experts telling us that the militarization of police have changed the mentality of police, that police are using lethal force when they shouldn't be, and, worst of all, police are lying to us about the use of lethal force.

And *The Hunting Ground* has experts telling us that sexual assault is a common thing on college campuses, which is scary, and complicating the matter is that university administrators have more reason to ignore and downplay sexual assault than acknowledging it's an issue and working to make it less of one. You come away from both of those documentaries knowing exactly what the problem is, why it's a problem, and why we should be upset about it.

Art of the Prank, by collecting the media hoaxes of Joey Skaggs and showing them to us one at a time, reveals, again and again, how desperate media outlets are for stories, how fallible their reporting can be. This isn't a matter of objectivity vs. subjectivity in the news. It's a matter of trust. Can we trust anything that's being reported to us? *Art of the Prank* is a reminder that we should be cautious of the media. Just because they're "professionals" and "news authorities" doesn't mean they live up to professional or journalistic ideals. That, even if they mean well, they aren't infallible. If they aren't fact checking a guy who said he's created a wonder-drug that cures all human ills...what are they fact checking?



Art of the Prank and *Making a Murderer* show us rather than tell us. This is dangerous because people could, as they've done with *Making a Murderer*, miss the main point completely. But *Art of the Prank*, and movies like it, is a special experience because it creates the scenario for an ah-ha moment. We're provided with all the necessary information to have the realization the film want us to have, to arrive at the main point through our own introspection and analysis. It's like the 90/10 rule of kissing. You lean 90, you let the other person go the last 10. It can be shocking if someone just leans in and kisses you. It can be really intense and romantic if someone leans close enough to kiss you but doesn't kiss you, challenging you to make the final move.



Art of the Prank not only raises awareness of Joey Skaggs and his unique style of art, but will, hopefully, cause its viewers to expect, want, and demand higher standards from the news media.





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