Andrea Marini (Director)
Art of the Prank. Relight Films. 2015. 85 minutes.

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It is no secret that today’s media environment is in flux. A once revered institution known for its public trust is going through a crisis of faith. With phrases like “fake news” and “Lamestream media,” signaling a growing public mistrust of the profession, it is important to ask, who is to blame? Is it the overzealous journalists looking for the story that will bring in the viewership or ratings, or is it people who have gone out of their way to infiltrate the media with false stories thereby tearing down the media’s credibility. Andrea Marini’s the Art of the Prank (2015) is a fascinating documentary that gives insight into the mind and machinations of the world’s greatest media prankster, Joey Skaggs. Called the godfather of the media hoax, Skaggs has managed to dupe mainstream media time and time again with his chicanery. Whether it is as a preacher (Father Joseph) giving absolution to politicians during the 1985 Convention or as the owner of a brothel for dogs, Skaggs fooled some of the greatest journalists and reporters with his eclectic brand of political theater.

Marini has a ball with the carnival atmosphere, complete with circus music, as we watch the likes of Mary Hart, Geraldo Rivera, Merv Griffin, half the anchors of CNN, and, yes, even Oprah herself succumb to this charming man’s folly. Marini makes the creative choice of foregoing a narrator, allowing Skaggs to tell his own story, giving audiences a glimpse into his past through his own eyes. The story is an interesting one as we watch him grow as a young artist in New York to Viet Nam protester during the late 1960s—using his art to garner media attention. It was during this time Skaggs realized the extent that the media shapes public opinion and as he put it, “skews a story to fit their own agendas.” Thus began Skaggs’s career in manipulating and exploiting the media, not only to further his artistic endeavors but also to use it to showcase its vulnerability and ego.

Dog brothels, sperm of the stars, using cockroaches to cure disease, Skaggs stopped at nothing to pedal his fake stories to the media. And the media bought it. One of the joys of this documentary is watching old footage of media personalities like David Hartman take semi-seriously Skaggs’s “company” to provide lock and chains and even real bodyguards to ensure dieters do not raid their own refrigerators.

The second half of the documentary slows down considerably as Marini focuses on Skaggs’s latest prank, producing a fake documentary called Pandora’s Hope. Taking
on the genetically modified organisms (GMO) industry, this faux documentary tries to sell its audience fiction instead of fact. Skaggs carefully concocts a scheme in which corporations are using the DNA of sharks' teeth to provide humans with unlimited supply of their own. Outlandish stuff to be sure but Skaggs stacks his documentary with actual scientists and experts further blurring lines between fact and fiction. The rest of the film details Skaggs trying to market the film to a number of film festivals for the prank to play out. Those sympathetic to his cause will find themselves rooting for his success, but this reviewer found it disconcerting that some festivals actually picked the film up.

It is obvious that Marini has compassion for her subject, but she wisely lets the audience make their own decisions. Unfortunately, we are never treated to an in-depth analysis of the man himself, just his accomplishments. I think it would be important to learn if he feels any responsibility for the current state of media and the public's increasingly negative stance of it. Does he even care? This film was released in 2015, predating the Trump administration, so we do not know.

The Art of the Prank would make a fine movie in any media ethics course. There it can be continuously argued who bears responsibility for the current state of media. Is it to pranksters, who set out to undermine the media's credibility, or is it to media itself who is quick to pick up these stories for the sake of viewership. Although the film drags a little in the second part, it gives an important historical perspective into the life of the ultimate media prankster. Whether this prankster is someway responsible for the state of media today is out for conjecture. One thing is for certain, the prankster is doing it with a smile on his face.