Fake Famous: A fabulous flop

When writer-director Nick Bilton said that Fake Famous (2021) would document “a social experiment,” my first thought was: Okay, so your experiment won’t have any concrete methodology. And it won’t provide any insight on the state of society, whatever that means. You just need something tagline-worthy to cover the costs of that pink canvas photography backdrop, which you already wrote off as a work expense.

Yes, influencers are fake! They meticulously engineer photoshoots, they obsess over online personas, and they might even purchase bots for fake engagement numbers to snag free products and brand deals. But isn’t the very concept of celebrity a test of persona manufacturing? Bilton bemoans the good old days, when people were famous “for having a talent, or playing a sport,” which, come on – even before the internet, the Hollywood studio machine was infamous for packaging stars for marketability. Advertising as an industry literally existed and continues to exist. The influencer is merely a continuation of the celebrity writ large for social media.

Bilton interviews several prominent marketing directors, all of whom work in influencer outreach, and yet none of them ever pause to consider their own culpability in creating the influencer. These marketers deride influencers, marveling at how “fake” they are on ad campaigns and in photoshoots. Well, you’re literally The Company scouting influencers; you’re the driving force establishing The Influencer as a viable career option. Considering the image-oriented nature of Instagram, it was inevitable that corporations would scramble to monetize it. As such, who can blame the influencer for milking the market of appearances. In food photography, food stylists will use glue instead of milk for a more photogenic bowl of cereal. A good set designer, a good photographer, and a good model can make the cheapest product and backdrop look stunningly expensive and appealing. The influencer is a combination of all these factors, only styled as the aspirational middleman for companies to market through. No one likes being sold something from a faceless company, but from your favorite aesthetic Instagram influencer? The product becomes familiar and placeable in your ideal daily life. Of course, this is all insidious, parasocial marketing, but Bilton’s thesis rests on blaming the scant handful of white women with blonde Balayage waves instead of the companies themselves. Capitalism is right there, still gripping the smoking gun.

The documentary ends with screenshots of wannabe-influencer children, all posed in mini versions of street fashion and couture, backed by a whining string score in minor key. “This is not fame,” monotones Bilton, “It’s all been labeled incorrectly.” But meanwhile, certain types of fame are okay for Bilton, such as “actors." (Just not the aspiring "actors and models" who answered his casting call, because apparently the demographic most likely to answer LA casting calls is too shallow for him). Meanwhile, James Corden continues to get acting roles despite his exile from England. We weren’t born yesterday; we know that celebrity rests on manufactured appearances and personality, industry backing, and lots of money. Meanwhile, for positive examples of social media outreach, the doc randomly cites videos of people clapping for frontline

workers (workers who are still working backbreaking hours with minimal pay) and, most bizarrely, Brad Pitt on SNL taking his wig off for frontline workers. John Legend playing the piano on Instagram Live is not the praxis Dominique, the only one out of three experiment subjects to make it to the end (is it even a viable experiment at this point?), thinks it is! Fake Famous even wants to link the history of bot usage to Russia instead of investigating Facebook, 4chan, and the existing gigantic alt-right population of America.

There are glimmers at profundity, such as the worry over all social interactions online being fake, or having to balance a contradictory online persona with a real life acquaintance; Wylie, one experiment subject, expresses an abrupt (somewhat scripted) outburst at an acquaintance checking in with his sudden spike in followers, dismissing their concern as “troll”-like behavior. But Fake Famous never delves into that fallout, preferring to float amid the most elementary tech news buzzwords. Influencers are a mere symptom of our dystopian late capitalist hellscape, and advertising has always been about projecting authenticity at all costs, even if the perceived authentic somehow fits right into unattainable beauty and socioeconomic standards. The sooner we realize this, the better for all of us.