



Ready Fictions presents
In Association With Wavelength Productions and Chicago Media Project,
In Association With Secret Sauce Media, Whitewater Films and Museum & Crane
Based on Original Artwork by Matt Furie

FEELS GOOD MAN

Directed by Arthur Jones



INTERNATIONAL SALES:

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LOG LINE

Artist Matt Furie, creator of the controversial comic character Pepe the Frog, begins an uphill battle to reclaim his iconic cartoon image from those who turned it into a symbol of hate.

LONG SYNOPSIS

As in many of the weirdest fairy tales, it all starts with a frog. This story, however, is all too real.

In November 2016, a barbaric election cycle had exposed a seismic cultural rift, and the country suddenly felt like a much different place. For underground cartoonist Matt Furie, that sensation was even more surreal.

Furie's comic creation Pepe the Frog, conceived more than a decade earlier as a laid-back humanoid amphibian, had unwittingly become a grotesque political pawn. Pepe was first innocently co-opted as a meme in the MySpace era, only later to be perverted as a totem of the alt-right: tweeted by Donald Trump, condemned by Hillary Clinton, and declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League.

As America's political and cultural narratives became more tribalist, Pepe was unexpectedly along for the ride. He was venerated as an icon among school shooters and racist organizations, yet his simple origins served a menacing dual purpose: Pepe could effectively terrify the public, while simultaneously making fun of them for being terrified.

Pepe's appeal among hate groups contained a dark magic: The more that powerful figures like Hillary Clinton denounced this smiling, ironic frog as a racist dog-whistle, the more potent and legitimate he became. As Donald Trump defied all odds to become the standard bearer of the Republican Party and then the president, Pepe became his avatar - Trump's ethos as disruptor inexorably linked to Pepe's image.

FEELS GOOD MAN is about an unexpected cultural rift, but also tells the personal story of an individual thrust into a maelstrom. The film is a Frankenstein-meets-Alice in Wonderland journey of an artist battling to regain control of his vandalized creation, while along the way confronting a disturbing cast of characters (including Alex Jones and Richard Spencer) who have their own peculiar attachments to Pepe.

As Pepe continues to morph around the world – last year, he transformed again into a symbol of hope among protesters in Hong Kong – FEELS GOOD MAN offers a vivid, moving portrait of one man, one frog, and the very strange reality we've all found ourselves living in.

DIRECTOR STATEMENT

In 2016, after Pepe the Frog was declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League, Pepe's creator Matt Furie asked his cartoonist friends (myself included) to flood the Internet with positive images of Pepe. It was an attempt to wrestle Pepe back from the alt-right. As much as I wanted to help the campaign, I was also in a unique position to do something more.

This need to shine a light on Pepe had become urgent to me a year earlier, in October 2015, when presidential candidate Donald Trump tweeted an image of himself as Pepe. The news media was baffled. Why was Trump tweeting an internet meme that had been appropriated by, among others, white supremacists and school shooters? To me, however, it made perfect sense.

I grew up in rural Missouri surrounded by the conservative media of the 1980s and 1990s. Permeating the landscape was the tribal gospel – then considered fringe – of Us versus Them. After leaving Missouri, I became an illustrator and animator and found myself in the underground comic scene, which is how I first encountered Matt.

As I worked with investigative news outlets over the next years, Matt and I developed a friendship. I watched as Pepe, his chill frog dude, became an Internet phenomenon. And while both Matt and the culture at large struggled to understand Pepe's descent into darkness, I felt like my background had granted me a unique vantage point. I could see a direct line from indie comics to internet message boards to school shooters to the President of the United States.

Because of this perspective, and because Matt trusted me, I knew it was time to document the Pepe spectacle. The journey has been anything but linear and it's far from over. Pepe's public life continues to grow and mutate into arenas that has felt irreversibly bleak at times but also has filled me with boundless hope. FEELS GOOD MAN is an expression of what the Pepe phenomenon says about our current moment.

—Arthur Jones

A CONVERSATION WITH THE FILMMAKERS

Can you talk about the genesis of the film and how you came to this story?

ARTHUR JONES (DIRECTOR): I'm friends with Matt Furie and a fan of his artwork. Beginning In 2017, we kicked around a number of creative collaborations that would address the Pepe dilemma in a way that felt artistically true for Matt. But, our collaborations kept hitting roadblocks because the people we pitched to were singularly fascinated with the politics surrounding Pepe. They were fixated on the character's stigma, not Matt as an artist. I think this frustrated Matt for a variety of reasons. He doesn't like being hemmed in by the larger cultural narrative of Pepe that is told in the news. At a certain point, I encouraged him to participate in a documentary film about the situation because I thought it was the best way for him to fully tell his story. I wrote a really long treatment for the movie and sent it to him and his partner Aiyana and they responded positively. I sat down and explained to them exactly how time consuming the project was going to be and convinced them

of my dedication to telling their story. We all agreed that the only way for the film to be good, was for it to have it's own integrity, so they gave me permission to make the film I wanted to make.

We started filming in late 2017 and over the next year a trust developed. While this was happening, I really undertook the film as an immersive research project. I spent weeks on 4chan.org combing the archives with the hope of telling an emotional story about the internet and American consciousness in the social media age.

The film turns to a really eclectic mix of experts and interviewees from cultural commentators to a 4chan "shitposter." How did you decide who you wanted to speak to and who could help tell this story?

AJ: Dale Beran, our main cultural commentator, had written an article in 2017 called "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump." I had talked to Dale on background for a couple months off and on as I was researching FEELS GOOD MAN and I discovered that he was also a cartoonist and had known Matt's work from the original Boy's Club comics. He had spent enough time on 4chan in the early days to have an insider's understanding of the subculture. This allowed him to write about the messageboard from a place of contextual complexity. He also has a great sense of humor. He has this wild laugh that I found contagious. Even when he's talking about dark subject matter, he imbues the material with mischief.

In addition to Dale, we decided to include a number of other cultural experts in the film to help round out our story. We found Dr. Susan Blackmore who wrote *The Meme Machine*, a book that expanded Richard Dawkins' gene-level notion of evolution. We wanted to really talk about memes as "cultural replicators," not just jokes traded online. The way memes inform the zeitgeist is not something that can easily be elucidated. To help broaden this discussion, we interviewed John Micheal Greer. He's an occultist who studies "meme magic" on 4chan. I know this sounds like hocus pocus, but he defines magic as "the art and science of causing change in consciousness in accordance with will." He's obsessed with the parts of our cultural mass mind that are unquantifiable and truly mysterious. We needed a voice like his in the movie because so much of Pepe's appeal is ineffable.

Mills is our 4Channer. His picture is a meme on several areas of 4chan, specifically on a board called /r9k. I had seen his photo on /r9k and I discovered that he had an archive of YouTube videos, some of which had over 100,000 views, some of which only a dozen or so. I started sifting through his less popular videos and found one where he is in bed holding up his phone and the first line of the video was, "What does Pepe the Frog mean to me?" The video felt sweet and vulnerable. In that moment, I realized he could be someone that could speak from a first person perspective and really guide the viewer through the story of Pepe.

Mills speaks to the emotional volatility of the character. People really feel connect to Pepe in a way that I think can be surprising to those who don't spend much time online, so he helps bring that perspective to life. People may think about Pepe as just a funny meme, but in reality he operates as

an emotional avatar for people whose basic social interaction exists on these anonymous message boards. Eventually, Mills agreed to record a Skype conversation with me and we started a dialogue. I think Mills and I had a rapport because our upbringings were similar. I grew up a poor kid, in a small town, who had been an angry, self-righteous and insecure teenager.

FEELS GOOD MAN features animation throughout. Can you explain the decision behind that and how it influences the storytelling?

AJ: My background is in animation, so that was always something that Matt and I talked about when we decided to collaborate. I've done a fair amount of multimedia production with journalists and motion graphics for feature docs and through those experiences, slowly came around to the idea of directing a documentary myself.

Our idea was to tell Pepe's story in a way that was separate from the Pepe you see on the internet. I think one of the reasons Pepe became a viral phenomenon was that he was perceived as context-free. Matt had drawn four Boy's Club comics in the mid-2000s and then stopped drawing the character, so most online users of Pepe do not realize he is from any specific source material. For comparison, SpongeBob Squarepants has been re-memed over and over again, often in pretty offensive ways, but everyone knows that SpongeBob is from a popular cartoon program, protected by corporate copyright. That carries more cultural weight than the random SpongeBob memes.

Through the film, we really worked to give Pepe the context that he deserves and create a canonized version of him. It felt true to Matt's spirit, but also gave the story some imagination, humor and beauty. Our goal was to make a visually unique film, but having a documentary about a JPEG isn't exactly captivating, so being able to build out both the landscape of the internet and Matt's wildly imaginative cartoon universe appealed to all of us.

The film maintains a pop and playful tone while exploring really dark aspects of the American cultural experience. Were you trying to achieve something specific with the contrast of tone and content?

GIORGIO ANGELINI (PRODUCER/WRITER): The film Arthur and I worked on previously, OWNED: A Tale of Two Americas, operates similarly. It takes on a dark chapter in American history and brings - not necessarily levity, but some sort of humor, that opens people up to intake new information.. The internet has increasingly allowed people to live out their own fictions. People put themselves in these bubbles and often the most effective way to break through is with humor. I think once you have people laughing, they open themselves up to new experiences.

AJ: Also, Pepe is just inexplicably captivating. Like the work of R. Crumb or Jim Woodring, Matt's drawings have their own gravitational pull. When you see Pepe, you have a feeling about him. He's funny. He's gross. He's kind of uncanny. His appeal is hard to understand, so people could use this strange, hard-to-decipher, frog character to obfuscate the meaning of some pretty vile ideas and jokes floating around online.

FEELS GOOD MAN is about making the wild irrationality of the internet come alive and the irreverent humor that is all over the internet needed to be part of the fabric of the film.

GA: For a lot of people, the 2016 election felt like a harsh awakening. They found themselves asking a lot of questions, unable to answer them, or even unable to know what questions to ask in the first place. Many were probably familiar with Pepe as an image but mostly unaware why this green frog was sitting at the center of this weird cultural moment. On its face, it is an absurd story, but it is a really serious one too. Negotiating both the absurd and deathly serious was at the core of our creative challenge. We wanted to inform folks, but we also wanted it to feel relevant and interesting to the very people that are part of the culture explored in the film.

In the film, there are three seemingly divergent phenomena occurring. You have this drawing of a frog, the history at large of memes, and the specific cultural moment of now with the rise of extremism and the alt-right. Can you speak about Pepe as a microcosm of the current climate?

AJ: Aaron Wickenden, one of our producers and senior editor on the film, came up with this term that I think was very helpful for all of us called 'the thin green line.' At first, the story seemed nebulous and almost like it was too big to tell. It was a story that could talk about everything and anything. You could talk about all the cultural ills that social media is creating, or you could speak about this singular silly stoned frog image. The thin green line helped us navigate this story - it is what we tried to hue to pretty closely in the narrative of the film. It's a story about artistic agency, but it's also a larger story focused on how culture moves through society.

GA: A character in our film refers to Pepe as an omen. I think when you first hear that, it is easy to laugh it off, but the more you sit with it, the more you realize it is true. We are living in a particular moment in history where the concentration of wealth and power is unlike we have ever seen. The internet has also created its own perverse world. In this milieu, you have a lot of people in younger generations struggling to make sense of what their life is supposed to mean. I think Pepe somehow embodies this existential uncertainty in a way words cannot really express. That said, whenever you have disaffected youth, there will always be opportunists in the wings, seeking to take advantage of this emotional unrest. Pepe means so many things to so many people, but if you take seriously what his image portends, I think you have to conclude that there is something off. Like a canary in a coal mine, Pepe is the frog on a forum.

CARYN CAPOTOSTO (PRODUCER): Pepe's story is a parable for our current cultural moment. He's been bullied and misrepresented yet his journey has helped to shed light on the online mechanisms that are being used to shapeshift meaning and misdirect people, causing intentional and unexpected disruption to cultural norms. His story sheds light on how the internet, the great technological connector, has served to alienate and divide us more profoundly than ever. Pepe's evolution, explored within the larger context of our collective cultural moment, can be seen as a wake up call. By shining a light on the gaslighting of (and with) Pepe, some power is taken away from the trolls.

What are your hopes for Pepe as the film enters the cultural conversation and what do you hope audiences take away from the film?

CC: My hope for Pepe from here on out is that he is not so misunderstood. He has become a vessel for meaning for many people, and as it is with all great art, meaning is subjective and oftentimes reflects the beliefs and experiences of the viewer. For me, Pepe is love. I think this film will encourage people to approach politics, especially in this election year, with fresh eyes, more attuned to how and why online content is created and how it fits within the broader cultural landscape. Hopefully, the film will raise awareness about how misinformation proliferates online and contextualize some of the more subversive content that people are digitally ingesting.

AJ: Our hope for Pepe is that this story is in his dark period and that Pepe is going to have a whole redemptive third act for himself as a character. We can see this kind of happening with the protesters in Hong Kong who have adopted him as a symbol of resistance and democracy. Ultimately, the story of Pepe is going to become something that people think about and fixate on because of its larger cultural and political ramifications.

BIOGRAPHIES

Arthur Jones - Director / Animator / Writer

FEELS GOOD MAN is Jones's directorial debut, but he's uniquely suited to tell the story. He's a cartoonist who came up in the same indie comics scene as the film's subject, Matt Furie. Jones published a book of his illustrations in 2011: Post-it Note Diaries (Penguin/Plume Paperbacks). Over his career, he's art directed animation and motion graphics for journalists and documentary filmmakers, working with companies including The New York Times, VICE, The Center for Investigative Reporting and The International Consortium of Journalists. Recently he's been a part of several documentary features: Seed Money: The Chuck Holmes Story (2015), BUNKER 77 (Amazon Studios, 2017), Owned, A Tale of Two Americas (2018) and Hal (Oscilloscope Films, 2018). Jones is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. futuresmells.com

Aaron Wickenden - Producer / Writer / Senior Editor

Aaron is a multiple Emmy and ACE Eddie nominated editor. He has cut some of the most notable documentaries of the past decade, four of which have been shortlisted for the Documentary Feature Academy Award: The War Tapes (2006), At The Death House Door (2008), Best of Enemies (2016), and Finding Vivian Maier (2013) which went on to be nominated for the award. Most recently he edited Won't You Be My Neighbor? (2018), a theatrical hit for Focus Features. His directorial/producing debut Almost There (2014) was made with Kartemquin Films and funded by ITVS. He and Jones have been friends for almost two decades and are excited for this to be their most ambitious collaboration to date. aaronwickenden.com

Giorgio Angelini - Producer / Writer / Cinematographer

Giorgio Angelini came into film from a longer, multi-faceted career in the creative arts. After touring in bands like The Rosebuds and Bishop Allen for much of his 20s, Giorgio enrolled in the Masters of Architecture program at Rice University during the depths of the 2008 real estate collapse. It was during this tumultuous time that the seeds for Giorgio's directorial debut, *OWNED: A Tale of Two Americas* began to take shape.

Following graduate school, Angelini began working with the boutique architecture firm, Schaum Shieh Architects, where he designed the White Oak Music Hall in Houston, Texas, as well as the headquarters for The Transart Foundation for Art and Anthropology, which won the Architect's Newspaper's "Design of the Year" award in 2018.

Focusing on film now, Giorgio launched a production company (Ready Fictions) in 2019 with his producing partner, Arthur Jones. A collaboration which began on *OWNED*.

Giorgio served as the executive producer for the feature film *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) and directed a documentary-short for celebrated performance artist Mary Ellen Carroll entitled *My Death is Pending...Because*. Giorgio is also the Executive Producer for the upcoming coming-of-age drama, *Shoplifters of the World*. He continues to seek out projects that can help expand our understanding of the perversity of American culture. Architectural, film, or otherwise. @giorgieangelini

Caryn Capotosto - Producer

Caryn Capotosto is an award-winning documentary producer and founder of the Los Angeles-based production company, [Museum & Crane](#). She produced the critically acclaimed documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018), winning an Independent Spirit, Critics' Choice, and Producers Guild Award for Best Documentary. Her other projects include the Emmy Award-winning *Best of Enemies* (2015) and the Academy Award and Grammy Award-winning documentary, *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013). Other documentaries include: *Afghan Cycles* (2018), *The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and The Silk Road Ensemble*, and *Filmage: The Story of Descendents / ALL*. Additional projects include the documentary series *Ugly Delicious* (Executive Producer, 2018), *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner* (Executive Producer 2019) and *Shangri-La* (Co-Executive Producer 2019).

Feels Good Man Selected Credits

Reality Fictions presents

In Association With Wavelength Productions and Chicago Media Project,

In Association With Secret Sauce Media, Whitewater Films and Museum & Crane

Based on Original Artwork by Matt Furie

Director:

Arthur Jones

Producers:

Giorgio Angelini, p.g.a.

Caryn Capotosto, p.g.a.
Arthur Jones, p.g.a.
Aaron Wickenden

Executive Producers:

Jenifer Westphal
Joe Plummer
Steve Cohen
Paula Froehle
Susan Morrison
Nancy Stephens and Rick Rosenthal
Julie Parker Benello

Co-Executive Producers:

The Natalie Orfalea Foundation
Lou Buglioli
Doug and Jenny Patinkin
Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman
Regina K. Scully

Contributing Producer

Nancy Blachman

Co-Producers:

Maggie Angelini
Kurt Keppeler
Kerry McLaughlin
Caitlin Ward

Editors:

Aaron Wickenden, ACE
Drew Blatman
Katrina Taylor

Original Music by:

Ari Balouzian
Ryan Hope

Sound Designer:

Lawrence Everson

Written by

Giorgio Angelini

Arthur Jones
Aaron Wickenden

Animated by
Jenna Caravello
Arthur Jones
Nicole Stafford
Khylin Woodrow

Additional Animation by
Drew Blatman
Angelo Hatgistavrou

Cinematographers
Giorgio Angelini
Ben Cox
Christian Bruno
Kurt Keppeler
Guy Mossman
David Usui

Music Supervisor:
Chris Swanson