Life

‘#SKYKING’ TURNS AN INTERNET SENSATION INTO A QUIET TRAGEDY



Promotional image of “#SKYKING.” The documentary was released Tuesday, April 14 2026 on Hulu and Hulu on Disney+.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ABC NEWS ON YOUTUBE

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“#SKYKING,” the new Hulu documentary, takes a bizarre piece of internet lore and reframes it into something much more relatable and thus, more unsettling.

The documentary, directed by Patricia Gillespie, is based on the case of Richard Russell, an airport employee who stole and crashed a plane.

Instead of embracing the internet’s dramatization of the event, the film approaches the story in a way that feels captivating without over-exaggerating or relying on shock factor. The documentary manages to stay grounded, focusing less on the spectacle and more on the person at the center.

The documentary acts as an account of Russell’s 70-minute flight, during which he spoke openly with air traffic control, at one point calling himself “a broken guy” while also making it clear he didn’t want to hurt anyone else.

Told using real audio, interviews and archival footage, the documentary builds an account that appears authentic and unvarnished, rather than constructed for entertainment.

What makes “#SKYKING” stand out is how it revisits the way the story originally circulated online. In the immediate aftermath, Russell became a popular internet figure, someone people frequently turned into memes and even labeled a “folk hero.”

The film combats that interpretation, redirecting attention to the realities of Russell’s life: long hours, relatively low pay and an increasing sense of isolation. These are common realities amongst working-class Americans, making his story increasingly relatable and easier to sympathize with. This also expands his story beyond the boundaries of the internet.

However, oftentimes the pacing tends to drag. The documentary sits in its calmer moments, adding emotional weight but also slowing down the story, especially towards the middle of the film. It’s a common issue with documentaries and, in the case of “#SKYKING,” it occasionally works against the film’s momentum.

The film is most effective when it strips back the effects and narrative techniques and allows the story to shine on its own. There’s no need for added narration or dramatic music in those moments. They force you to sit with the reality of the situation rather than consume it as part of a movie.

“#SKYKING” is strongest when it resists turning the story into something it’s not. It doesn’t try to frame Russell as a hero or reduce him to a villain. Instead, it presents a situation that feels messy, tragic and very human. It may not always maintain its pacing, but it’s far more thoughtful than the viral version of this story ever was.

RATING: 4/5



Director of the new Hulu documentary “#Skyking”. The series covers the case of Richard Russell, an airport employee who stole and crashed a plane.

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