

# DOUGH ON THE GO!

COMINGS AND GOINGS OF LA ARTIST AND WRITER DOUG HARVEY

SATURDAY, APRIL 2, 2016

## THE OL' FILM FLAM



Ross Lipman, the legendary film restorationist responsible for preserving the cinematic legacies of Bruce Conner, Kenneth Anger, John Cassavetes, and a cluster of forgotten American neorealist gems including "Killer of Sheep" and "The Exiles," has turned his attention to a more high-profile form of film history with his expansive examination of Irish literary genius Samuel Beckett's sole foray into the movies -- 1965's short silent narrative "Film," starring Buster Keaton in one of his final screen roles.

Lipman takes a notoriously opaque 20 minute wordless black & white philosophical chase scene, and unpacks two hours worth of historical context, biographical insights, conceptual musings, and structural poetics into "NOTFILM" (2015), his complex and moving documentary -- also black and white, but rarely wordless (except to emphasize the gorgeous score by Bela Tarr's main man Mihály Víg). While there's plenty of down-to-earth making-of grit to feed the viewer's narrative appetite, the heart of the story is Beckett's and Keaton's respective takes on being and nothingness, and who gets to watch.

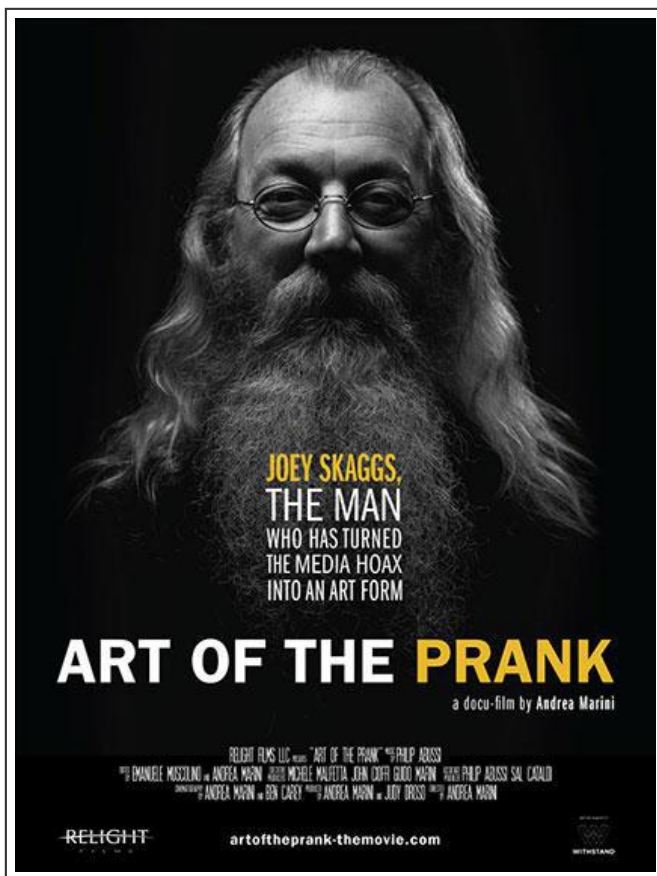
Charged with the restoration of the avant-garde milestone, Lipman developed a fascination for the work, with its reflexive implications about the ethical and psychological dimensions of cinema, and it's curious identity as the meeting ground for two diametrically opposed but deeply similar geniuses of 20th century culture. Not to mention cinematographer Boris Kaufman -- Dziga Vertov's baby brother, and

- "Apollo 18" by They Might Be Giants
  - "Brakhage" by Jim Sheddon
  - "The Gift" by Lewis Hyde
  - "Rough Travel For A Rare Thing" by Bill Callahan
  - "ABCDEFGH" by Chumbawumba
  - "Payback" audiobook by Margaret Atwood
  - "The Decalogue" by Krzysztof Kieślowski
  - "Burden of Dreams" by Les Blank
  - "Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America" by Barbara Ehrenreich
  - "Thelonious Monk" by Robin D.G. Kelley
  - "Lightning Over Water" by Nicholas Ray & Wim Wenders
  - "Dodes'ka-Den" by Akira Kurosawa
  - "Generation Kill" by David Simon, Ed Burns and Evan Wright
  - "Vacuum: A Lipo Suction Tragedy (A True Story of God's Mercy)" by Christine Mattered
  - "The Revenge of the Lesbian Folk-Singer" by Kevin Mutch
  - "Pickup on South Street" by Sam Fuller
  - "Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi" by Geoff Dyer (How can you go wrong with an alcoholic middle-aged art journalist with no cell phone for your hero? Very.)
  - "The Hurt Locker" by Kathryn Bigelow
  - "Avatar" by James Cameron
  - "The Road" by John Hillcoat
  - "Xavier, Renegade Angel" by PFFFFR
  - "The Year of the Flood" by Margaret Atwood
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cameraman for all three of anarchist Jean Vigo's celluloid masterpieces.

Lipman appears to have developed his obsession just in time, as several of the participants -- particularly Beckett's go-to actress Billie Whitelaw and Grove Press publisher and "Film" producer Barney Rosset (both creative titans in their own departments) are themselves teetering on the brink of the Void in their interview segments. Rosset, whose flickering memories of a missing prologue to the Beckett short sparked Lipman's passion, was the source of the missing footage as well as surreptitious audio recordings of the pre-production meetings. These are pretty great, but there isn't enough to them to justify a feature length deconstruction.

Luckily, Lipman's scholarship and curiosity are up to the task, and ultimately wind up overshadowing the archival snippets to be the elements of this layered scholarly collage that stick with you after the curtain falls. The balance tips the other way in "Art of the Prank" Andrea Marini's long-awaited career-spanning overview of the disruptive antics of media prankster Joey Skaggs, whose work holds a mirror up to his medium in a more interventionist way.



It's not that there's any lack of historical context, biographical insights, etc. (although there is a scandalous absence of art critical

commentary) -- but the wealth of historical documentation delivers the real meat of Skaggs' practice, next to which any discursive analysis pales. "Art of the Prank" also contains a doozy of a structural poetic as its major plot device -- following the artist through the trials and tribulations of his latest leger-de-brain, which involves stem cells, GMOs, and the very film that is tracking its devious development.

Since the late 1960's, Skaggs has been planting absurd fake news events into the mainstream media -- often staging elaborate theatrical hoaxes with actors, sets, fake websites and business cards and press releases -- only to pull out the rug at the peak dramatic moment -- to the consternation and embarrassment of the infotainment professionals. Usually the only recourse for big media is to exact revenge through unflattering or distorted profiles (with a muttered retraction of their journalistic sloppiness tacked on somewhere) -- which is why this fair and balanced account is so welcome.

Skaggs' conscious practice as a media hoaxster dates back exactly 40 years to April Fool's Day of America's Bicentennial year, when he dramatically revealed the fictional nature of his highly publicized "Cat House for Dogs" in court, having been subpoenaed by the Attorney General of the State of New York. That moment was captured on video, and is included in "Art of the Prank" along with archival documentation of the diet-enforcing mercenary Fat Squad, the Fish Condos, Celebrity Sperm Bank, Dog Meat Soup, WALK RIGHT!, Dog Meat Soup, Maqdananda the Psychic Attorney, and Skaggs' heroic attempt to windsurf from Hawaii to California.

Many of these have unique underlying social or political content -- the subtle critique of the justice system built into The Solomon Project, which allegedly used an NYU law school computer program to find OJ Simpson guilty of murder, for example. But together they comprise a sustained multivalent attack on a culture that nurtures, sustains, exploits, and even enforces the gullibility of the public. One aspect of the story that this film brings to light is how Skaggs' deceptive practice evolved directly out of young Joey's frustration at the sluggishness and lack of autonomy in his chosen field as a visual artist. The entire symbolic ocean in which we swim, which most of us take for reality, is revealed to be a fabrication. Or as Joey puts it "If I believe that, what else do I believe that's total bullshit?"

NOTFILM screens in LA April 1 - 9 at various locations

<http://filmbysamuelbeckett.com/updates/>

Art of the Prank screens in LA April 10th at 8 PM presented by Slamdance Cinema Club at the Arclight Hollywood

<http://www.artoftheprank-themovie.com/screenings/>