

24 Hours of Avant-Garde: The Good Hours, Part II

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Trypps / Let Each One Go Where He May (Ben Russell)

Russell calls his on-going *Trypps* project, available online at [Vimeo](#), “psychedelic ethnography,” the first word signaling an internal trip (head-trip), the second an external one. In other words, a phantasmagoric documentary, inspired by Jean Rouch. The first couple of *Trypps* are the phantasmagoria, abstractions of dots and tree branches moving faster and faster in rhythm for the viewer's own tripping. The next move further and further outside to watch the trippers and increasingly externalize the trip in the sagging mosh-pit crowd at a *Lightning Bolt* show slowed down and accompanied by a drone in hypnogogic simulation of the event that's being witnessed, to a Richard Pryor routine recut as *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, to a sign in Dubai flashing epileptically the impossibly modern command “Happy” (ostensibly: only “App” is visible) that Russell describes as the Pryor trypp without editing, to an unedited 12 minute take of a Surinamese death dance as the dancers dress up, walk to the square, and, on cue, lose all self-control.

Any of the *Trypps* might be reductive on their own, but together they're something else, a conspiracy theory of strange, orgiastic impulses at work everywhere. After seeing them, one starts experiencing trypps all over: kids in a playground swinging like pendulums in four steady tempos; headlights at night on the Taconic; beggars reciting their routines for money on the subway; the entirety of *Lisztomania*.

Roughly speaking, a trypp is both an impulsive musical performance and a ritual intricately designed and choreographed, by intention or happenstance, to shake lose the body from the mind, in an order that's a release from order into chaos, the unconscious, the id. As such, Russell's project is analogous to Rivette's in the early 70s, also inspired by Rouch. The central trypp is probably the Pryor routine, which has an appeal to near-

nationalistic impulses against patronizing whites that's basically all in the telling, the intonation and timing (impulsive music). Pryor owns his crowd's reactions like a demagogue and suspends his punchlines to bring down the house in orgies of uncontrolled laughter. Russell, who says he really likes the routine, misses none of this, and edits the footage with all the usual deconstructionist devices to show up Pryor as just an image-idol: the footage blurs, loops, and stacks back on itself until multiple Pryors, perpetually stuck in pre-climax, face off against each other, and the crowds, diffused into high-contrast, look to hail him from miles around. But of course Russell likes the routine. The film, even as it reduces Pryor to what he is, a signal, gains its own hypnotic rhythms. The trypps are all about abandoning oneself to communal impulse and command: even when it's a sign dictating "Happy."

Let Each One Go Where He May, 13 10-minute-long shots of two Surinamese brothers following paths on foot and in canoes with the camera sometimes following the road independently, takes up all manners of rigorous forms and rituals—the predetermined paths, the predetermined length of the take, the single activity (building a fire, rowing, cutting trees) that's methodically followed out for the duration of the shot—ostensibly to see how they can be broken by small, sudden intrusions of reality that operate like epiphanies in what's theoretically a dull 130 minute slog. There are the moments when a girl smiles for the first time in the reel's final second; when the camera tracks a quiet road for nine minutes to one minute of a mine's open expanse to the horizon with the din of 30 machines (also dictating the men's activities); when, after minutes, the camera in a canoe pans up to the sky; the fire starting; trees falling like dominos at one brother's command and opening up the entire scene for light to infiltrate and re-vision it.

The film culminates with *Trypp 6*, as Russell's camera itself finally releases a space to the open-air just as the performers arrive in the town center and a Brueghel-like panoply of erotic routines over-floods the camera's sight, front and back, side to side. Here, for the only time, do the characters step out of the guiding labyrinth of *Half-Life 2* into a space that really does let them go where they may—and of course, it's all in ritual. You can imagine Russell remaking *Land of the Pharaohs* as 90 minutes of talk over blueprints about safety regulations and the proper puttying followed by 10 minutes of consummated romances and wars and the return of the Egyptian Gods: Russell's interested not just in the routine practicalities and practical routines before the divine release of fire and light and dance, but in making those basic releases of fire and light and dance that anyone's seen seem divine again after 9 minutes of methodical routine. So *Let Each One Go* is really good when it's really frustrating. Russell hasn't totally overcome the mythic problem he's set for himself to show a displaced people regaining their place among nature and the gods in a half-developed country that's been historically exploited from all sides and still has its descendents of runaway slaves bound to the drudgeries of mechanized life—and the film would probably be more interesting if he had managed to film more takes like the tree-cutting and village-dance—but it's at least set out mythic problems and sometimes gotten mythic results. And yet in a way Russell's only showing what he needs to show and letting us see what we need to see: with his deliberately simple people leading their simple lives, and doing nothing else, playing everymen of anywhere in the most precise, worked-out routines, Russell's on the way to Flaherty.

O'er the Land (Deborah Stratman)

Another film of quotidian routines filmed as epic pageantry. Coming after *Riff*, which declares that the world's bad and should be taken very seriously, *O'er the Land*, which in 50 minutes documents and restages a vet's war story, a firefighter drill, a border patrol scouting, a Revolutionary War reenactment, and a football game, with occasional voice-over and anthems, works from the more honest premise that war's a chaotic extension of neatly-staged rallies done for fun and practice, an idea familiar from *Dr. Strangelove* and *Inglourious Basterds*, the last chapter of *The Iliad*, and my own recent experience with kittens who show affection by playing training games for the hunts and murders they'll perform as cats. So there's a fun, invisible thesis, and an empirically justifiable one, to fit the pieces together into a compass of modern Americana dress-up cases doing what they can not to be modern. And of course Stratman's in on it as a guerilla filmmaker. It's never clear what's theory and what's practice, what she's staged or her characters have staged, so that everyone becomes a performer, even as

Stratman watches them fluidly switch in and out of roles, as a line of cheer-leaders exercising slowly falls into step at a game's sidelines. Everyone, from football players to soldiers to officers, is a costumed professional. *O'er the Land*, like Tati's films, is a documentary comedy, but one about war as a domestic routine to maintain borders and self-contained identities that Stratman for her own part slips between.

And like Tati's films, it's a hell of a work of cinematography, unrivaled by any of the webcam posers coming out of bedroom-box Europe. Stratman exploits 16mm's deep-focus precision so that spectators half-a-mile from the camera can be seen acting with the characters in the foreground. As in Tati, everyone's worth watching, and mills around the scene like pieces on a board. Stratman's favorite Benning-like strategy is to film still lives in nature or a room, and then, when the space has settled as a blown-up photograph, to send in a character or two to interact with it. It's like Bugs Bunny let loose in a Veronese. It's not that the spaces suddenly seem real and livable but that the characters, all dolled up, seem faker than ever, accoutrements and companion-pieces to their room. It's a documentary doll-house. The real laugh would be if some Hollywood insider like Gus Van Sant saw the movie and brought Stratman West as a cinematographer. Hollywood would quake.

In Comparison (Harun Farocki)

Daniel Kasman described it well enough [here](#), and there's not a lot for me to add. Farocki surveys brick construction around the world—because brick construction is as ancient and mechanically modern a societal foundation as prostitution. The efforts of a local community operating in harmony and hierarchy to build a house outside by local customs turns out to be not far from the efforts of a global community operating in harmony and hierarchy in plastic, antiseptic factories to do the same. Amidst the women schlepping six bricks on their head in India, the most human character is saved for the end, a painstaking robot who delicately fusses with brick positions, while an actual guy sits back at a control board. There's no message. Local forms have been replaced by anonymous ones, and the men look as distracted as ever. Programmer Gavin Smith introduced it something like this: “For weeks, I've been telling everyone they had to see this movie about bricks... But I think you'll agree with me that this film is about everything, besides bricks.”



If There Be Thorns (Michael Robinson)

I want another look. Like the other Robinson films I've seen, *If There Be Thorns* shifts between two worlds as if, as in children's books, the real world were a cover over a wormhole into a TV land of slo-mo sitcom monsters. The two worlds are also two whole strands of avant-garde. On the one side, there's the natural, contemplative, landscape, immersive Romanticism of abandoned spaces after the humans have left (no longer so Romanticized, but the bugs still chirp). On the other, there's the synthetic, found-footage, overwrought trash romances from pop culture detritus, *Full House* clips from a studio Hawaii luau, and, here, a Stevie Nicks song. So highbrow vs. lowbrow, Paradise vs. hell, nature vs human, but all giving the sign that real humans have long left the earth. Usually Robinson slows down the tacky clips to hone in on some hysterical scene, already overdone in the first place, but threatening to consume the film in this single moment of trauma that Robinson works over until it becomes genuinely traumatic, and the utter fakery of the melodrama becomes the point: these are emotions beyond reason or even reality.

If There Be Thorns plays with motifs that are symbolic of so many things and gone over so many times that they stop being symbolic and simply become themselves, impossible images, like one of a nail in a tree spouting blood that could be sexual, religious, murderous, or mythical. The whole film, all of which it looks like Robinson shot, seems to take place on a desert island except for the impossible intrusions of impossible imagery, like the above, an egg opening with a full-grown animal (if I'm remembering right), and the Nix song. The whole thing seems to take its cue from Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe* or *Death in the Garden*, and as there, utopia and apocalypse, reality and artifice, play as inextricably and inexplicably bound together. The surest intro to Robinson's work remains Michael Sicinski's, [here](#)