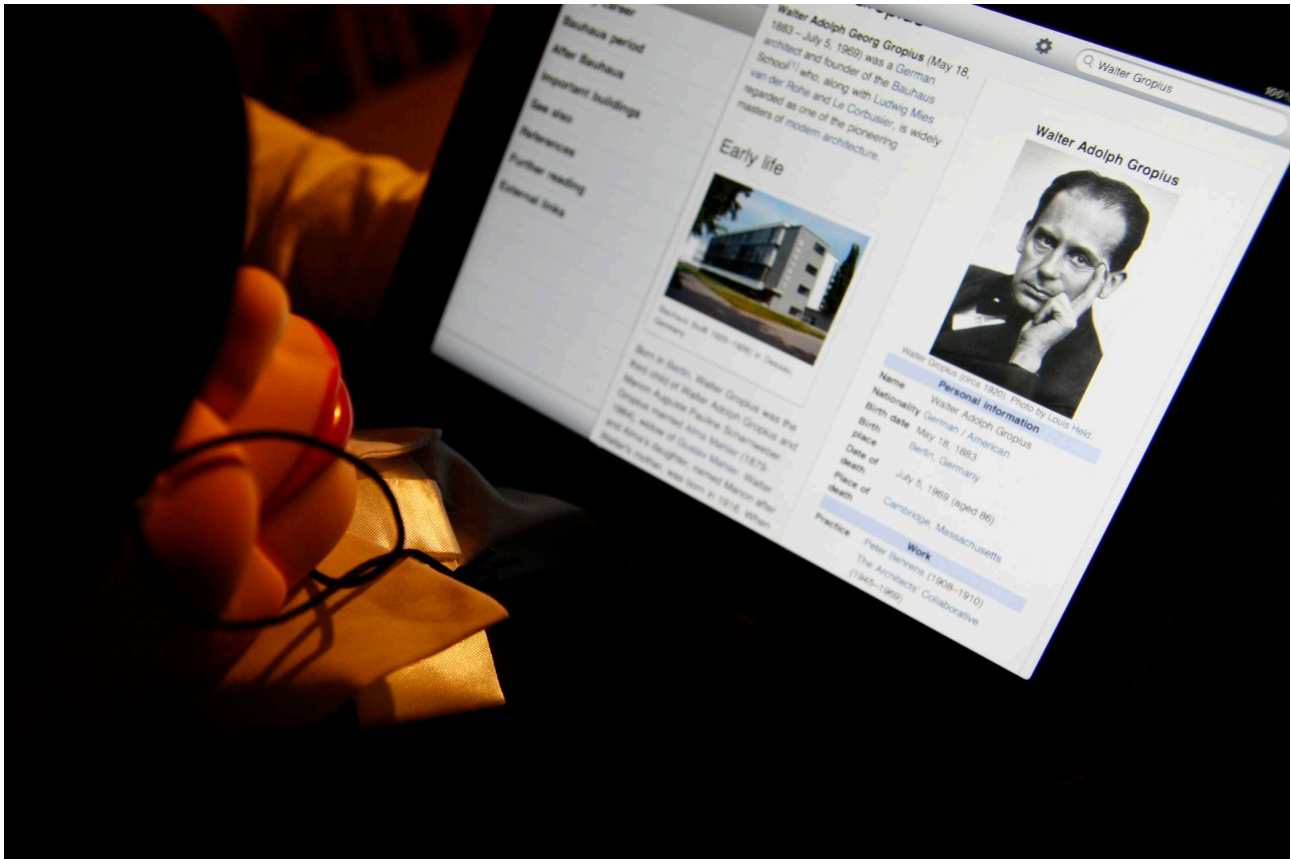


Only For Dummies: An Interview with Steve Fagin

By Jordan Crandall
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[Steve Fagin](#) is an artist who uses new logics of organization in his films, videos, and media works. In *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel* (1986), he draws from diaries, postcards and novels to produce a film structured as an epic poem -- a "folktale" for a post-literate culture. In *The Machine that Killed Bad People* (1990), he uses the syntax of CNN as an organizing conceit, to produce a film that complicates the boundaries between event, spectacle, and spectatorship. In *Oliver Kahn* (2003), which is loosely based on a one-act play by Samuel Beckett, he draws on the conventions of the soccer match to produce a meditation on collecting and memory. In these works and others, he is not interested in staging a "critique" of the dominant media forms that he engages, along with their effects on the popular mind. Rather, he is interested in experimenting with the conditions of the novelistic, as it is accessed through present-day platforms, bringing together domains, procedures, and genres across time and history in order to engender unanticipated larger- or smaller-scale effects. This renegade mode of working requires skillful choreography, informed irreverence, and street-smart timing. For Fagin, nothing is sacred:

any actor can be potentially be assembled into a motley crew of consorts, taken on an imaginary voyage, brought to the table at a dinner party, or installed in the arena of a boxing match.

Or in this case, brought into a friendship network on Facebook.

Only For Dummies: Fractured Utopias of the 20th Century (2010) is based on the organizing principles of the social network (namely, Facebook) and the platform of the mobile phone (namely, the iPhone). In using the structural conditions of these domains -- conditions particular to the software, hardware, and the social arenas in which they are used -- Steve Fagin sets the stage for the invention of an entirely new novelistic form. He refers to it as a "miniseries," yet it is a miniseries with an epic nature. Its "star" is the ventriloquist dummy Charlie McCarthy, the wisecracking sidekick from *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* radio show of the late 1930s and 40s. In this contemporary epic theater, Fagin summons the conditions of the vaudeville act, yet he retools its logics of assembly in accordance with the "friending" and "tagging" principles of Facebook and the navigational principles of the iPhone. The mischievous puppet, an anarchic avatar of sorts, does Fagin's dummy work. As with all of his projects, it is not a matter of parceling out the domains that are perversely integrated and the authority figures that are "overthrown" so much as exploring the conditions of the strange new synthetic multi- spatial and -temporal event that results -- its affects and intimacies; its dramas, dispositions, and rhythms; its intricacies, rules, and treacherous enfoldings.

Yet this epic theater, rendered newly mobile through the demands of the cell phone, also refers to the conditions of the encyclopedic museum -- in this case, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the institution that commissioned it. Much of the content of *Only For Dummies* is drawn from the museum's collection, and the project was made within the frame of a larger series Fagin produced for the museum called *Cell Phone Stories*, which appeared on a weekly basis over the summer of 2010 (all of the episodes are archived at <http://cellphonestories.wordpress.com>).

Understood in terms of this larger dimension, *Only For Dummies* opens out into a broader reflection on the conditions of the access of cultural history, and the museum as the privileged site of cultural knowledge -- a site that is now being challenged by digital repositories like Facebook and Google. The exploration that the work conducts, then, is not only that of new artistic, literary, or theatrical forms, but of the conditions of the institutional structures -- however public or private, cultural or corporate, high- or low tech -- through which we engage them.

In using the platform of the iPhone and the syntax of Facebook as structuring principles in *Only for Dummies*, you are thinking about the ways that culture is accessed, scaled, and shared today, and the organizing principles used to format it, in an increasingly mobile and

networked world. Could you talk about why you chose, at the level of content, the historical subject of Utopia as the primarily focus? What do these stories of Utopia have to say to us today, in a mobile landscape dominated by instantaneity, multitasking, and historical amnesia?

"The past is never dead. It is not even past." This William Faulkner quote is one of the driving forces of the work. It actually comes into to play in the piece -- Faulkner is a friend of my dummy, Charlie McCarthy. The mandate of Only for Dummies was to rethink the encyclopedic museum, how we think our cultural history, as we stand in front of it in the present. Here I was particularly impressed by Harold Szeeman's curatorial work, his exhibitions that reorganized cultural history, treating a century as a junk pile of debris to be reorganized with a strong disregard for traditional categorization. As you say, standing in front of our patrimony on a mobile phone using a Facebook-like app opens up a very particular "can of worms." I surely was not interested in suggesting -- hence all the surrogates, quotes and sidebars, so called distancing devices -- that historical circumstances are to be taken seriously because "they were just like us," erasing the specifics of history in favor of a hollowed out sameness. I loathe this form of identity through narcissistic mirroring. Rather, I wanted to focus on how the rhetoric and logic of the new, its hopes and dreams, took a very particular turn with the Soviet Revolution, the invention of Hollywood, and the coming to existence of Bauhaus, and how much of our thoughts about revolution -- a more perfect place, the better future pragmatically planned -- are largely ghosted, ventriloquized utterances from things taken to be long dead and buried. You might not remember it, but it remembers you.

Let's explore the significance of Charlie McCarthy, since he is a primary dummy in this drama -- one that, through a peculiar bit of ventriloquy, functions as your own sidekick and stand-in (you speak of him as "my dummy"), as well as everyone else's (since this is a miniseries "Only for Dummies"). There is a lot of voice-throwing going on here, vaulting across history and between personages, real or fictitious, as facilitated by the odd new forms of rhetorical and structural coupling that are part-and-parcel of the Facebook landscape. What perverse form of puppetry are you inventing here, Steve? Given your background in film history, one could say that you're pressing these new relational modes of "friending" and "tagging" into service as a form of networked montage, but you're working with a transference that is deeper and more implicated than that. In friending, you bring personages into a qualified relation where one has to consider some bond of intimacy, some higher-level affiliation that would seem to complicate the homogenizing or flattening effects of much digital media play.

Sigh, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, who could resist the idea of a ventriloquist act being at the center of one of the most popular American radio shows of all time? Sure Charlie is my dummy, but one should prioritize

that he was an everyman “my dummy,” a cult hero. A surrogate for the pettiness, disruptiveness, mischievousness and disrespect for convention and authority in “All.” On the other hand the “true” culprit was someone else: it is thrown speech. Charlie is a “mere puppet.” *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* radio show that Bergen and McCarthy did was an important motivation for the overall organizational structure of the piece, as was the vaudeville show as a genre. Each of the episodes in my cycle has an episode of the Bergen /McCarthy radio show to listen to. The shows have guests drawn from different contexts talking to each other, jokes, musical interludes, and so on. Yes, one could refer to what I'm doing as “networking montage,” but the use of appropriated text, speech, sound and images both still and moving has many sources and inspirations many of which do not come from the cinema. In fact, I claim infidelity to all of the lineages I so admire. Whether it is fine art, vaudeville, cinema, literature, or television, wherever we go when we talk tradition I'm out the side door. As Groucho says, “Whatever it is I'm against it.” That being made clear, some of the great things that I pilfer and scavenge from ever so devoutly are, to name a few, Flaubert's Bouvard and Pecuchet, Schwitter's overall artistic production (sound, image, writing and architecture) and the Brecht/Weil plays, songs and attached critical writings. One can see Brecht and Weil's suggestions as to proper spectatorship of their “epic theater” as the dummy cycle's Emily Post/“proper behavior” guide as to how to engage my cycle as viewer/audience. One of my favorite exchanges in the whole cycle is the rift in the Bauhaus chapter where Brecht and Weil discuss distancing and audience engagement through the youtube clip from the first Schmeling/Louis boxing match. Ideas around counter punching and keeping the correct distance are discussed. Brecht/Weil suggested spectators in their theater should behave like spectators at a boxing match. Also, I wanted to make perfectly clear through the punching example that affect matters in Brecht/Weil. Distance is about the correct distance to counter an attacking opponent of great danger, in this case Joe Louis, and has nothing to do with affectless alienation. Each of the sections foregrounds a different type of juxtaposition. The first section on the Soviet Revolution highlights radical change with direct conflict. This does grow out of the writings of Eisenstein, but even this more classical montage is thrown a curveball. For instance when a Mayakovsky poem goes on about change being a crashing wave against a rock, Nabokov interrupts to say a crashing wave does not alter the sea. Putting Nabokov into the Soviet Revolution debate is meant to add another perspective to the debate. This from left field friend-of-a-friend remark -- Nabokov is a friend with Charlie but not Mayakovsky -- is an indulgence that the Facebook protocol provided me. In the Hollywood section the interruption through looping into fantasy is highlighted. The film sections move from the section in *The Pirate* on cinema as hypnosis, putting one under a spell. The second topic addressed is the lure of the beautiful image, Marlene Dietrich in Morocco and the third, the ambient banal companion of the TV in *All That Heaven Allows*.

In the Bauhaus section I try to address the capacity of juxtapositions to produce a synthetic advancement of an argument. I guess this type of effort returns to the “failed” experiments of Eisenstein in October in regard to intellectual montage. This seemed proper for Bauhaus, it being a school after all. I feel some of the efforts in this section, especially around Brecht, for instance (the boxing one mentioned above) really do get somewhere on this thorny dilemma. The use of the Facebook structure allows all of these radical juxtapositions to be smoothly bridged. I feel this making things so radically different come together with such ease puts me closer to the collage of say Schwitters or Cornell rather than Bruce Conner or Robert Rauschenberg. I believe there is a quote by Cornell that the problem lies not that things are so far apart, but that they can be brought together with such ease.

So, identifying with Weil's call, you're the sports correspondent installed in the place of the art critic! The ringmaster in place of the writer -- as in the clip that Charlie McCarthy posted (in which he tagged W.C. Fields)! If Brecht/Weil suggested spectators in their theater should behave like fans at a boxing match, and this suggests a "proper behavior" guide for us, as audience, to engage your dummy cycle, then how do we resurrect, or engender, that sense of "liveness" crucial to the immersive power of the "match" -- or, for that matter, the performative act? A "liveness" where a certain level of density and affective charge is crucial. You've not exactly chosen a platform that is conducive to this -- the web-enabled mobile device seems rather to produce audiences watching and tapping away in relative isolation, and the level of investment they might otherwise have with social media like Facebook is withheld. You've made a deliberate choice not to make this work interactive -- and understandably so, since that would dilute its precision. It offers the semblance, but not the actuality of participation. As you say through Brecht/Weil, gauging distance matters, and you've carefully judged your distance here. By holding at bay the kind of social investment that social media like Facebook compels, you're rewriting the terms of the game. You're bringing another order of investment into play. Does your mini-epic mobile-theater/prizefight have a "punchers chance" of being understood?

Well, I don't exactly see myself in the “punchers chance” tradition exemplified by the aged bloated George Foreman in his one punch 10th round KO of Michael Moorer to reclaim the Heavyweight crown. This “punchers chance” style has the advantage of evoking the “fear factor,” but it's just too plodding for me, and the weapon I choose, the mobile cell phone platform, doesn't really provide the possibility of a one punch KO. I feel my style is more stick and move (tap, tap swipe on your touch screen), keep the jab in their face (tap tap), bob and weave, keep those feet moving (move from new screen to new screen), clockwise, then counterclockwise, keep shifting your point of attack (backwards, then forward) and do not get caught

in a corner (do not respond to chat -- for assurance this feature was eliminated). My hope is that eventually the opportunity will present itself to unleash a lethal multi-punch barrage -- a compelling post followed in rapid succession by a series of lively comments to the solar plexus. Yes, I imagine myself Sugar Ray Robinson, but alas, maybe you're right, I'm just Jake LaMotta always moving forward, trying to remember to avoid the punches, getting hit all too often, clawing at the eyes, rabbit punching their kidneys, wrestling and overall just trying to outlast my imagined adversary. Alas, my version doesn't bring victory, but at least I get the satisfaction my worthy opponent will be pissing blood for at least a week... and "that's entertainment." The prizefight analogy evoked by Brecht/Weil really touches me deeply. Watching boxing matches every Friday night was the only thing I ever did with my dad as a kid and to this day I collect prizefights. By the way I also collect classic cinema DVDs, operas, musica cubana and Soccer matches. The choice of the cell phone as my dancing companion was motivated by several factors. First, the issue of scale. Museums have gotten into this edifice Complex thing and LACMA with the Broad and Resnick structures and CEO Michael Govan's lineage -- working with Thomas Krens at Mass MOCA, then the Guggenheim, then the Guggenheim Bilbao, and then on his own with DIA Beacon -- are at the core of this contemporary effort to recast the museum as the epic aurific heir of the medieval cathedral. It struck me to engage the museum through this handjob size device, the cell phone, "you have the whole world in your hand," would produce and interesting dilemma. Second, the juxtaposition of the presence of objects in the museum and their deaurified youtube surrogates, reproductions and ersatz Photoshop reorganization in my piece opens up an interesting discussion of the relation of the aggressively trivial to its more statuesque antecedent. Third, the standard but restricted history traditionally presented by the museum, redeployed via the polymorphous perverse organization of Facebook. Fourth, the touch screen dimension -- the physical tactility of touching and the rhythm of the movement of engagement in contrast to the "do not touch the merchandise" dimension of museum attendance.

In a provocative way, you bring together touching and punching, the tiny gesture and the larger-scale boxing match. The intimate act and the public event. Immediacy and history. The problematic of scale -- the relation between the small and the colossal, between the miniature and the "mega," however understood in terms of the museum -- is a problematic of form that has haunted the twentieth century, one that you can see in terms of the development of television, computing, and telecommunications, proceeding in tandem with the ascendance of simulation, where miniaturized representations (as you say, deaurified surrogates) gradually gain precedence over realities, and interface controls substitute for movements. Margaret Morse wrote about how, in our vehicles of communication, shopping, and transportation, small,

repetitive acts effect large-scale changes. The flick of a finger can change worlds. In the disciplines of architecture and design, this scalar incommensurability is often taken up as a design problematic. It is something that one endeavors to work with, to "solve." In contrast, you mention that you're producing a "disconnect" -- between the *experience* of the large-scale museum and *its being accessed* on the miniature handheld device -- and this would suggest a critical engagement. Several disconnects come to mind. As you've pointed out, physical tactility, touching, is important in your project, and this stands in contrast to the sanctified, "do not touch" spaces of the museum. You're also working with the new culture of appropriation and mixing -- with Web 2.0, all phenomena are fair game, they become personalizable, modifiable, exchangeable -- and this counters the privileging of originality and ownership that the museum necessarily perpetuates. Everything is up for grabs. But you're doing something more than enacting a critique. You're setting forth a terms of engagement -- an interdependency. It's political, in the positive sense (the production of new possibilities). (I know you won't like either take -- your being negative or positive!) One of the areas where scalar disjuncture can be engaged is to find a way out of spatial concepts and container/contained relations. Also, moving away from preconceived hierarchies to more fluid concepts of interorientation. Moving from spatial boundaries to interface protocols. You're doing this in the dummy cycle. You're setting forth protocols of connection that do not respect conventional spatial models. You're doing it with the technology and the interface conventions and syntax (namely, Facebook's) -- but oddly enough, you are also doing it with the figure of Charlie. He is a trickster figure, an unconventional avatar that defies conventional space-time categories. It's like Zizek's take on the Mystery Man in David Lynch's *Lost Highway* -- he presides over the convolutions and flips in the script, and mediates the disbelief when we learn that one person can, following the rules of phantasmagoria, be in two places at once. He is the fantasmatic figure of a pure, neutral medium-observer, asexualized, childishly neutral Knowledge. As if enacting a symbolic network, Charlie can be everywhere at once. He is in the space of the museum -- he gazes at a Constructivist work, watches a Vertov clip, poses in front of an image of Stalin -- and yet he is elsewhere, accessing a group photograph of Bauhaus luminaries on an iPad, and watching clips from classic Hollywood films on a television in someone's living room. He makes connections -- "friends" and "tags" -- personages who could not logically be brought together. He traverses history and place. He's an

avatar into which anyone can step, always enacting a ventriloquy of which he himself is the product.

That's a lot to chew on even for someone that wrote a book called *Talkin' with Your Mouth Full!* I will pick across the carcass of your queries assuming the indulgence of a buffet, picking and choosing here and there rather than the protocol of "formal dining." I see Charlie as Charlie, disruptive, precocious; having the flexibility of conversation of the variety show. He is an historical figure that is extended across time and space, but behaves according to the "logic of his character." The three episodes of the dummy cycle more or less are structured as three days of Facebook postings related to visits to LACMA. In general he behaves according to the protocols of Facebook; he makes comments, post pictures, tags, makes new friends and orchestrates the comments of his page. We have partial access to the activities of his friends Mayakovsky, Stalin, W.C.Fields, Bertolt Brecht, and William Faulkner, etc. This eclectic group is perhaps more interesting than the typical friends of a Facebook user, but it is not any more or less eclectic than most users. I do not feel the cluster of information, discussion and personages defies logic. It might be weird, but it is fastidious in its logic. It simply explores the possibilities of Facebook to produce a ground of discussion. What permissions for debate and evidence does this banality, Facebook, provide? This is the baseline for the project. There is nothing in Facebook protocol that would not permit a discussion across time, different spaces and friends that are famous, but long dead. There is Facebook page for Mayakovsky for instance, and I, Steve Fagin, have already friended him and had exchanges. That Charlie is a ventriloquist dummy is interesting, but more as an organizing banality, an empty center, a site for "received ideas" rather than some mysterious trickster. I'm not for either the mysterious or the trick. Charlie is hollow inside, has no depth. What you see is what you get. Perhaps the issue of scale can be best addressed through the Hollywood chapter of the cycle. I try to produce a scale within another scale effect. Not precisely a mise en abyme, but something I hope to be equally troubling and meta, a place where the shifting nature of aura, you succumb to the wonder of the larger than life cinema and control, the world is in "the palm of my hand" feeling of the cell phone world are performed and reflected upon. As we hold the phone in our hand we see in turn Charlie, sitting in a room, camera circling round him at first we only hear the sound of the movie he is watching, then slowly the film is revealed over his shoulder and then the camera tracks past Charlie into the film. The films used in this section are Minnelli *The Pirate*, Von Sternberg's *Morocco* and Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*. Each of the sections viewed address a specific dimension of affect and scale. The section from *The Pirate* has Gene Kelly discussing hypnosis, Franz Mesmer and putting Judy Garland under "the spell" through a spinning alluring glass globe. The *Morocco* section has a scantily dressed Marlene Dietrich selling apples via the "knowing" song "What am I bid For My apples" to the seduced audience that includes Adolphe Menjou and Gary Cooper.

The men in the movie, knowing the fate of Adam, still eagerly buy the apples from our Marlene/Eve. The lure/siren quality of the cinema is put into play both in the movie and in the use of the movie in my piece. By the by Marlene is also a friend of Charlie. Yes, Charlie understands the risk involved in having “such a friend.” He might be dumb, but he is not stupid. In the section from *All That Heaven Allows* we have Jane Wyman’s “self centered” son and daughter running off to “their own lives” leaving her with a gift wrapped television, a piece of banal household furniture that will be a surrogate to her for human companionship. The overwhelming feel of loss of affect in this Sirk segment is truly a wonderful depiction. Charlie’s comment to this clip is taken from the previously worked over material in the section related to love and loss via Judy Holliday’s rendition of “the Party’s Over” in *Bells are Ringing*, now you must wake up, all dreams must end, the party’s over, it’s all over my friend.

You've mentioned that your work functions as something closer a case study rather than exclusively as something that is more metaphorical, suggestive, or simply ironic -- the worst example being the fortune cookie wisdom of "one liner" art. It functions on the level of the novelistic rather than the poetic. The questions are put into play within the work itself as fully fleshed out examples, demonstrations, and proofs, rather than exclusively allusions.

Although my fondest wish has always been to approximate the novel, I must confess my work stands more as a halfway house between a vaudeville sketch and a clandestine interlude at a cinematic matinee. Unfortunately, in my case, someone forgot to turn the cinema’s house lights down. [Jordan Crandall](#) is a media artist and theorist. He is Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at University of California, San Diego. He is currently at work on a new film entitled *Exposure*, a meditation on identity and ethics in contemporary network-driven cultures, where operational media and personal media combine in unstable, emergent systems and ecologies. He is also continuing to develop his multi-platform work *Showing*, which looks at erotic cultures of self-exposure and display