In 1909, Mark Twain was caught on film for the first and last time by Edison's Kinetograph, strolling around his mansion in Redding, Connecticut (a 48 minute drive from the Whitney Humanities Center), smoking a cigarette, chatting with his daugh-
ters, and contemplating his imminent departure with Halley's Comet. Born just after the comet's first appearance in 1835,
Twain puckishly predicted that he would die upon its return. A year later, the Great American Wit delivered his own punch line
and died of a heart attack as the comet soared into the sky.

Adopting Twain's cosmic final journey as its premise, THE ADVENTURES OF MARK TWAIN (1985) brings
its star back to the screen, molded out of clay, launched in a hybrid steampunk spaceship, and accompa-
nied by three of his beloved characters, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Becky Thatcher. As the four explor-
ers travel through sculptural tapestries of the universe, Twain regales his young companions with stories
from his literary oeuvre—"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Eve's Diary, The Mysterious
Stranger, and "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven"—that gush out of books, purple curtains, and other
portals. As David Thompson writes in a review for The Mark Twain Journal, "it is apparent that the ship
itself is literally an airborne embodiment of Twain's mind and imagination as well as the archive for every-
thing he ever wrote."

Remarkable as this story sounds, it has long been overshadowed by the form pioneered by director-pro-
ducer-animatior Will Vinton, who coined the term "Claymation," won an Oscar for his first Claymation short,
CLOSED MONDAYS (1975), created such memorable clay characters as the California Raisins and Domino
Pizza's ill-fated mascot the Noid, made the monsters for Disney's RETURN TO OZ, and in 1985 released
the first Claymation feature-length film, screened here this afternoon. In THE ADVENTURES OF MARK
TWAIN, literally everything is made of clay, even the backdrops of clouds and starry skies, which were clay-painted in multiple passes and layers
to create depth and transparencies. As a result, the film reportedly required 130,000 figure changes and took three and a half years to
make. Sculpted, shot, and edited in the converted bedrooms of a house behind a barbershop (Vinton and his crew dubbed it the Barbershop
Studio), the film was an intimate family affair. The animators worked in the basement while the producer pored over Mark Twain's writings in
one bedroom and Vinton's then-wife, Susan Shadburne, wrote the script in another. Knowing these details from production contributes to the
paradoxical pleasure of the film, which Stanley Kauffmann described in The New Republic as the simultaneous appreciation of its smooth-
ness and "the invisible immense labor that made the smoothness possible."

The other paradoxical pleasure of MARK TWAIN is its inability (or refusal) to decide upon its target audience. Stamped with a G rating and
released around the country for a brief run of matinee performances by a failing distributor, the film was quickly relegated to the "Kiddie
Circus" where it would languish, confronted by the confused dismay of children who had presumably not read the rave review in The New
Republic, until its unlikely reemergence as a viral video with a cult following decades later. The "Mysterious Stranger" sequence from MARK
TWAIN became a YouTube sensation partly through the initial uploader's erroneous claim that it had been censored for the TV version due to
its disturbing content. Vinton has since declared himself mystified by this rumor and its circulation, but like the return of Halley's Comet, it is
a mysterious phenomenon that has brought Mark Twain back to the sky and screen, for another generation to enjoy.

**NEXT UP:** ONE OF THE FIRST WESTERNERS TO ENCOUNTER THE KAPAUKU PAPUANS OF NORTHERN NEW GUINEA, PROF. LEOPOLD POSPISIL OF YALE'S
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY MADE A PIONEERING ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM, KAPAUKU 1954/55 - 1959. A 16MM PRINT OF THE FILM,
PRESERVED BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER THROUGH A GRANT FROM THE NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION FOUNDATION,
WILL BE PRESENTED WITH LIVE NARRATION BY PROF. POSPISIL ON SUNDAY, MARCH 27 AT 7:00 PM.