

Animation Practice, Process & Production
Volume 8

© 2021 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/ap3_00006_1

Received 14 December 2020; Accepted 14 December 2020

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Experimental animation and the neosurrealist remediation of popular music video

Keywords

experimental animation
surrealism
music video
avant-garde
subversion
stop-motion
popular music

Abstract

Once appearing to function primarily as a commercial tool for popular entertainment, the popular form of music video has recently been exposed by scholars as formally and functionally diverse, with a rich history stretching back decades before the advent of MTV. Animated music videos owe much to centuries old traditions spanning the visual, musical and performing arts, providing performative and material models that inspire contemporary video directors. Experimental animation, surrealism and music video form a matrix of historical and contemporary significance; however, few scholars have undertaken close examinations of the relations between them. John Richardson and Mathias Korsgaard show how music video directors have employed surrealist compositional strategies together with experimental animation methods, thus giving rise to challenging new forms that traverse disparate approaches to art and culture. Building upon their contributions, this article explores the continuity between experimental animation,

surrealism and music video, with a view to discovering the subversive potential of this matrix. In order to probe this potential, the author examines how music video directors experiment with animation technique as a means of subversion and enrichment of popular music video. Through close analysis of music videos directed by Adam Jones, Stephen Johnson, Floria Sigismondi and Chris Hopewell, this article charts the continuity of surrealist strategy across culturally specific moments in history, thus provoking questions around the perceived functions of animated media and popular music video.

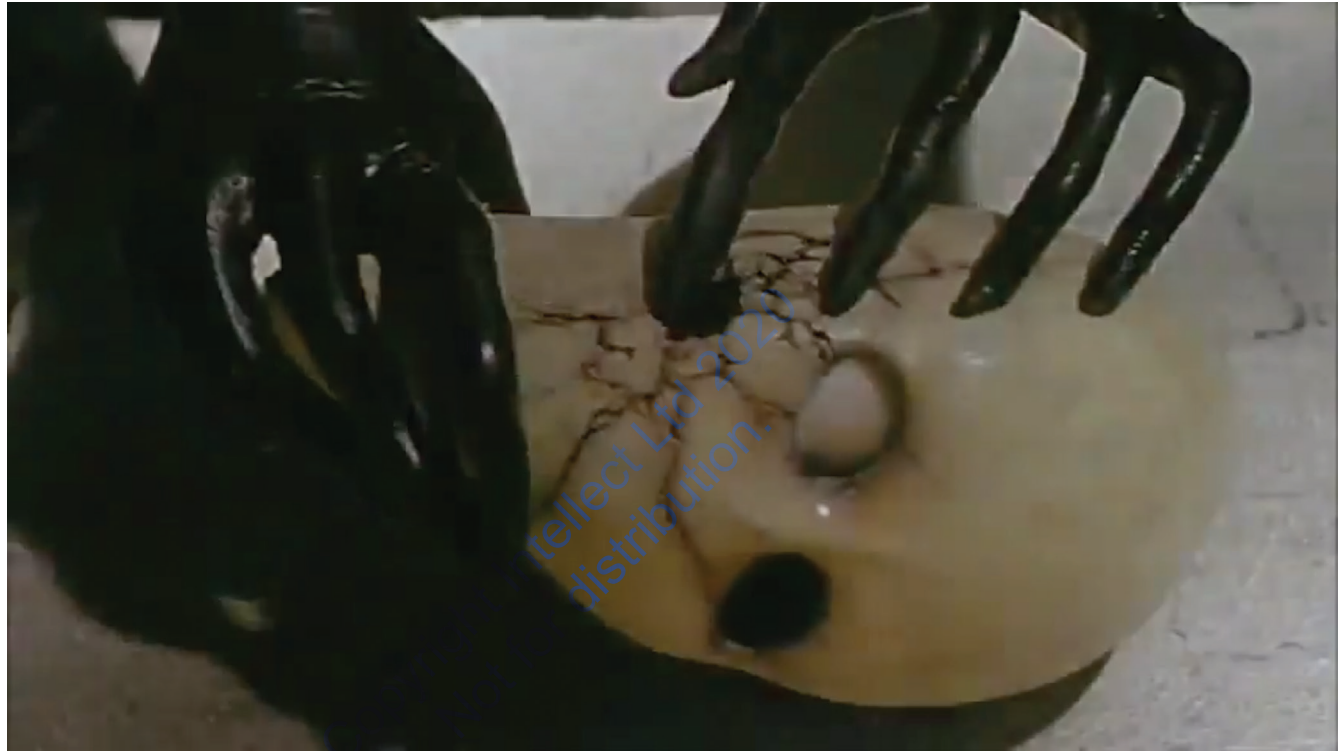
‘Prison Sex’

Although barely visible in the haze of an extreme close-up shot, we see what appears to be a collection of guitar strings reverberating against each other. Recalling the visceral sensation of fingernails on a blackboard, my body shudders upon hearing the sound of metallic strings being scraped. The tension builds until the string is cut, releasing us from this moment of synaesthetic torment. My body recoils, realizing that the wire skeleton of a puppet has been mercilessly cut with wire cutters, amputating its legs. Tool’s gritty masculine guitar sound kicks in as a sequence of close-up shots reveals the nightmarish world where an amputee puppet struggles to exist. Later, in a peak moment of affective intensity, the violent perpetrator of this ‘Prison Sex’ world portrays Quay-like sentience by stroking the cracked face of the puppet, much in the way a person cannot stop themselves from scratching away at a scab until it breaks open. Though the discomfort is excruciating, it is impossible to avoid the tactile sensation of the perpetrator’s finger as it probes the cracked and crumbling surface of the slain puppet’s porcelain ‘skin’, eventually loosening a piece and poking a hole in the puppet’s face (Figure 1).

In this music video for Tool’s song ‘Prison Sex’ (1993), Tool guitarist and director Adam Jones performs an act of neosurrealist remediation by referencing and borrowing the world-building components that define the surrealist animations of the Brothers Quay. As such, this video usefully exemplifies the subversive potential of this act of neosurrealist remediation, showing how discomfiting it can be for anyone unprepared to explore music video’s relationship with surrealism and experimental animation. As defined by Paul Taberham, ‘the basic premises of experimental animation hark back to the early twentieth century avant-garde’ (2019: 17). Taberham explains how experimental animation ‘typically offers formal challenges to the spectator’ akin to the aims of independent filmmaking and non-commercial artistry (2019: 18). Against this backdrop, popular music video may initially seem like an unlikely counterpart for experimental animation.

Within the burgeoning field of audio-visual aesthetics, there are many publications on celebrity and populism. Such a focus has tended to eclipse the examination of artistry and experimental

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practices associated with the animated music video. However, a few studies have cast light on the inspiration some music video innovators glean from avant-garde traditions and experimental animation methods as antecedents to music video. Publications by John Richardson (2019, 2012, 2010) and Mathias Korsgaard (2017) have shown how music video directors have employed surrealist compositional strategies together with experimental animation methods, thus giving rise to challenging new forms that traverse disparate approaches to art and culture.

This article draws upon my examination of music videos that engage with the work of surrealist animators. In doing so, I examine the ways in which music video directors experiment with animation technique as a means of subversion and enrichment of popular music video. Through the process of examining music videos directed by Adam Jones, Stephen Johnson, Floria Sigismundi, Chris Hopewell and others, I chart the continuity of surrealist strategy across culturally specific moments in history, and explore the correlation of surrealist strategies and experimental animation techniques, arguing that the two approaches work together in symbiosis, serving to subvert the benign commercialism that has been associated with popular music video.

The prehistory of animated music video

Although music video once appeared to function primarily as a commercial medium for popular entertainment, the form has recently been exposed by scholars as functionally diverse. Music video has been examined as a site for philosophical provocation, and as a stage for complex acts of representation, performativity, world-building and the development of participatory cultures. It has also been mooted as a suitably flexible form with which to provoke a therapeutic engagement with identity (Korsgaard 2017; Railton and Watson 2011; Perrott 2019a, 2019b, 2015). Unconstrained by the conventions of more literal or didactic modes of representation, music video shares with animation an almost unlimited potential for provoking an imaginative engagement with memory. As elucidated by Mathias Korsgaard (2017), music video has a long and rich history spanning many decades before the advent of MTV. It is therefore vital to consider the role of antecedents such as Visual Music, silent cinema, 'Gesamtkunstwerk', opera, baroque, Brechtian theatre and avant-garde approaches to filmmaking, all of which form an important historical context for considering the relations between experimental animation, surrealism and music video. Animated music videos owe much to the centuries-old traditions spanning the visual, musical and performing arts, which have provided performative and material models that inspire contemporary music video directors.

The broad interdisciplinary tradition of Visual Music can be considered as both a precursor and a close relative of contemporary animated music video. Throughout the twentieth century, the audio-visual-kinetic relations prefiguring music video underwent experimentation across various modes of aural and musical performance and multiple media, including painting, photography, film, kinetic

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1. For more on the continuity between the Visual Music work of Len Lye and contemporary digital video, see Perrott (2013).
 2. *Detournement* is a strategy of reusing cultural items, interrupting conventional signifying systems by altering their familiar coding and rerouting their dominant or intended meanings. Proponents of the *Surrealist* and Dada movements established a set of practices motivated by a desire to interrupt and defamiliarize linguistic and cultural conventions, enabling the playful reproduction of cultural forms, liberated from the perceived constraints of individual consciousness. Practices of detournement included using automatic writing methods, reworking and defamiliarizing texts and phrases, cutting up and rearranging their signifiers to achieve semantic discrepancy (Stubbs 1996). Writers such as Isidore Ducasse and André Breton established the initial framework for detournement as an avant-garde technique, which was later developed as a salient

sculpture and installation art. The continuity between experimental animated film and music video is especially apparent in the direct films of Normal McLaren, Harry Smith and Len Lye.¹ The work of these experimental animators exemplifies the intersections between Visual Music and surrealism. Both traditions share interests in sensory relations, as well as the subconscious or primordial experience with the animistic quality inherent in the human body, objects and familiar materials existing in our natural environment. As with Visual Music, surrealism intersects with the avant-garde traditions mentioned above as antecedent to the development of contemporary animated media and music video. Drawing upon the few scholarly texts that contribute to charting the continuity between surrealism, experimental animation and music video (Richardson 2019, 2012, 2010; Korsgaard 2017; Perrott 2019b), I aim to build upon this work to explore how these overlapping fields operate to subvert the diametric boundaries drawn around popular and avant-garde, and 'high' and 'low' cultural forms. I also aim to provoke questions around the perceived functions of animated media and popular music video. In order to do so, we must first be prepared to probe and question our received understandings of surrealism.

Surrealism

Since the meaning of the word 'surreal' has weakened due to its liberal application to a broad array of phenomena, it is necessary to define my use of the term 'surrealism', as the avant-garde tradition in art and literature, which, though often relegated to the 1920s–30s, predated this period, and continues to provide conceptual and methodological tools for artists to release the creative potential of the unconscious psyche. The early surrealists were driven by a drive for artistic and literary freedom, and this spirit of liberation is true for surrealist animators such as Jan Švankmajer, who endeavour to create sensorially provocative art through the irrational juxtaposition of images and the estrangement of everyday objects. Such uncanny provocations continue to be practised by contemporary animators, music video directors and musicians, who experiment with strategies such as aleatory composition, alchemical process, automatism, analogical composition, temporal disjuncture and *détournement*.² The experimental animations and music videos discussed in this article are variously underpinned by the following broad tenets of surrealism:

- A motivation to tap into the subconscious psyche, dream-states, primordialism, archetypes, myth, magic and alchemy. This is achieved by the animation and defamiliarization of familiar objects and materials.
- A desire to transcend and subvert normative signifying systems (such as the codification of gender, identity and sexuality), and 'rational' structuring devices (such as classical narrative or linguistic rules), often creating irony and absurdist humour. This is achieved through strange or

illogical juxtapositions, analogical and aleatory compositions and playful methods of assemblage, such as montage, bricolage and frottage.

- An aim to explore alternative ontologies through the manipulation of things we experience as 'real' and familiar, often provoking an uncanny experience. This involves strategies of defamiliarization and the provocation of uncanny perception by automatism and temporal and audio-visual disjunctures, all of which can be brought about by giving life to inanimate objects and by altering the perception of human movement by pixilation and other speed manipulation techniques.

While these broad-brush-strokes outline some facets of surrealism, practising surrealism is not a 'paint by numbers' exercise, and the deeper meaning of such an approach can be lost by a narrow focus on style or technique. It is therefore important to consider the conceptual basis underpinning the motivations, strategies and methods mentioned above.

Concrete irrationality

Salvador Dalí asserted that the whole ambition of the artist is to 'materialize the images of concrete irrationality' (Dalí 2000: 65). According to Kristoffer Noheden, 'Dalí conceived of concrete irrationality as the wilful simulation of an over-active interpretation of the surrounding world' (2017: 192). The Czech surrealists reformulated Dalí's notion of concrete irrationality, creating their own interpretation of the concept 'as a means to locate poetry directly in material reality' (Noheden 2017: 160). As a member of the Czech surrealist group, Jan Švankmajer's desire to locate poetry in material reality, including his interest in the irrationality and transformative powers of familiar objects, is consistent with the group's reformulation of concrete irrationality. This concept's significance to Švankmajer's use of pixilation and object animation has been discussed by Laura Ivins-Hulley, who describes 'concrete irrationality' as 'a meeting point between reality and imagination, where the boundaries between the two cannot be drawn [...] it is composed of fragments of things that make sense, and yet the whole does not make sense' (Ivins-Hulley 2013: 270). This understanding of Švankmajer's understanding of concrete irrationality is further complicated by Noheden (2017), who argues that 'Švankmajer negotiates between Czechoslovak surrealism's focus on concrete irrationality and French surrealism's assertion of the importance of myth and magic' resulting in 'a creation of minor myths that can be understood as instances of what Gaston Bachelard calls the material imagination'. In his preoccupation with myth and magic, alchemy is the key process that activates Švankmajer's philosophical approach to surrealism (Noheden 2017: 192–93). Since alchemy implies experimentation, merging of materials, transformation and recreation, Švankmajer's alchemical process is instructive for those navigating the crossroads of surrealism and experimental animation.

strategy of political activism by Debord and Wolman (1956) and the Lettrist and Situationist movements during the 1950s (Vicas 1998).

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Experimental animation and surrealism

It goes without saying that not all experimental animators are surrealists and not all surrealist practitioners are experimental animators. However, both share a common aim to transcend rational modes of perception. As pointed out by art historian Roger Cardinal, 'the whole idea of the animated film is to suppress the categories of normal perception [...] [and to] annihilate the very conditions of rationality' (Wells 2002: 5). As mentioned above, this is an aim shared by many surrealists, so it would seem that animation is by its very nature a surrealist act. Referring to the above statement, Ülo Pikkov deduces:

hence, every animation film is encoded with a certain surrealist undercurrent, irrationality [...] animation film features a number of typically surrealist characteristics, yet it is not regarded as surrealist in general. At which point does animation film become more surreal than 'normal' and thus 'properly' surrealist? How to measure the degree of surrealism in animation film? (2013: 32)

Pikkov responds to these questions by focusing on the 'experience of the audience and the context of the filmmaker' (2013: 34). Since the aim to 'suppress the categories of rational perception' is shared by many experimental animators and surrealists, an assessment of whether an animated work is surrealist or not should consider both the motivations of the practitioner and audience experience. Focusing on the latter, Pikkov suggests:

in order to establish the criteria by which to assess the degree of surrealism in animated film, we should concentrate on the notion of 'uncanny' or, in other words, on the subconscious uneasiness caused by dislocation of realism. In this context, realism should be considered as something traditional, previously experienced, which, when dislocated (presented in an unfamiliar manner), creates an unconscious sense of uncanny. (2013: 36)

As we shall see, this idea is exemplified by the animated films and music videos examined here. But it is not enough to establish our criteria for what counts as surrealist by focusing only on audience engagement. Audience experiences of uncanny sensations may lead them to describe an animated film as 'surreal' or 'surrealist', but the filmmaker may not have employed surrealist strategies or methods. In the broad cultural and economic context in which animators practice, there is a difference between the innate surrealist properties or 'encoding' of all animated films, and the deliberate use of surrealist strategies by experimental animators. As alluded to by Taberham (2019), experience with

avant-garde practices is more likely to be gained by animators operating within an independent or experimental context than those working strictly in an industrial or commercial one.

But even if we impose a distinction between 'perceived' and 'purposeful' surrealism, how do we know whether experimental animation techniques are practised as part of an overt surrealist act? Pikkov set out to research these questions by conducting interviews with ten animators who had been described as surrealist by key figures of the animation community. These include Švankmajer, Stephen and Timothy Quay, Priit Pärn, Jerzy Kucia, Igor Kovalyov, Raoul Servais, Piotr Dumala, Koji Yamamura, Atsushi Wada and Mati Kütt. Pikkov's focus on eastern Europe as a central point of influence is therefore useful to my study, since eastern European animators constitute a significant reference point for the music videos examined in this article.

However, a more comprehensive study tracing the continuity of surrealist practices through animated film and music video might usefully extend further back in time to 'proto-surrealist' artworks, such as the fantastical paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, the object collages of Giuseppe Arcimboldo and the comic strip 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' by Winsor McCay (1905–11).³ Such a study might also consider the aesthetic influence of Emile Cohl's animations *Fantasmagorie* (1908) and *The Puppet's Nightmare* (1908).⁴ This is apparent in the Cohl-like animated line drawings in Gastón Viñas' fan-made music video for Radiohead's song '2 + 2 = 5' (2015),⁵ and the childlike dream imagery depicted in Michel Gondry's music videos. With France having been a central cultural hub for surrealists, such a study might also examine the continuity between René Laloux's film *La Planète Sauvage* ('The Fantastic Planet') (1973) and the Disney produced musical short film *Destino* (Monféry 1945–2003) featuring animations based on storyboards drawn by Salvador Dalí (Jones 2014). The continuity between surrealist animation and music video could also be charted by tracing the influence of Terry Gilliam's absurdist Monty Python cut-out animations upon George Dunning's zany *The Yellow Submarine* (1968), a hybrid promotional film/long-form music video for the Beatles, or the music video for their song 'Strawberry Fields Forever' (1967), which includes a Švankmajer-esque sequence of extreme close-ups of mouths, eyes, noses and ears. Such a study might also examine the idiosyncratic phantasmagoria of Hayao Miyazaki's films *Spirited Away* (2001), *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Castle in the Sky* (1986) – the latter film providing aesthetic inspiration for the surreal landscapes depicted in the Gorillaz music video *Feel Good Inc.* (Hewlett and Candeland 2005).⁶

The vast historical and cultural trajectory outlined above suggests the potential for a rich and expansive study of this topic. There is only limited space here to briefly point to some of the links across this broad network of continuity, before narrowing my focus and limiting my case studies to a handful of music videos that are instructive for their particular combination of surrealist practices and experimental animation techniques. Having identified Švankmajer as a central figure at the intersection of these fields, Pikkov's study of eastern European animators provides a useful window

3. Also relevant here are the Fleischer Brothers *Betty Boop and Cab Calloway* cartoons, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer's *Felix the Cat* cartoons, as are those created by Tex Avery for Warner Brothers and MGM, including the 'Looney Tunes' signature style.
4. Chiba points out that 'Cohl belongs to the Incoherents, a group of artists that contributed to a rudimentary phase of surrealism, and his passion for criticizing Modernism appears in his work *Fantasmagorie* (1908), featuring imaginative and absurdist drawings' (Chiba 2015: 39).
5. For more on this music video's references to animation history, see Perrott (2019c).
6. The surrealist influences upon the video *Feel Good Inc.* are discussed by John Richardson (2011: 201–39) in his chapter 'The Surrealism of Virtual Band Gorillaz: "Clint Eastwood" and "Feel Good Inc."

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7. Music videos directed by the Brothers Quay include: *Stille Nacht II: Are We Still Married?* (1992), *Stille Nacht IV: Can't Go Wrong Without You* for His Name is Alive (1993), *Long Way Down (Look What The Cat Drug In)* for Michael Penn (1992) and *Black Soul Choir* for 16 Horsepower (1996).
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into the cultural, political and philosophical context underpinning Švankmajer's surrealist strategies. Drawing on his interviews with eastern European animators, Pikkov observed their shared motivation to undermine oppressive political and social structures and to liberate the subconscious, particularly by way of imaginative engagements with the material and metaphysical world. According to Pikkov, the animated work of these filmmakers:

reveals a desire not to imitate life, but rather to shed light on the metaphysical world. The personal internal universe and visualisations of the subconscious are of prime interest to them. In their films, numerous readymade objects are animated, rendering the entire cinematic space 'alive'.

(Pikkov 2013: 36)

Such an observation is perfectly exemplified in the films of Czech animators Švankmajer and Jiri Barta. See for instance, the animated representations of the human body, objects and cinematic space in Švankmajer's film *Byt* ('The Flat') (1968) and the animation of mannequins, materials and space in Barta's film *Klub Odlozenych* ('Club of the Laid Off') (1989). A similar preoccupation with animating space and unleashing the life force of objects is also apparent in the films of Polish-born, French-based animator Walerian Borowczyk, who became known for his preoccupation with eroticism and material fetishism, and whose work influenced animators such as the Brothers Quay and Terry Gilliam (Mikuurda and Woynarowski 2015: 57). While Borowczyk's live action films are distinctive for his representation of human figures as dolls, the 'defragmented body' as 'an animated still life' and his 'blurring the lines between live-action and animation', his animation of objects has been compared to that of Švankmajer (Mikuurda and Woynarowski 2015: 58). For example, in his film *Renaissance* (1968), Borowczyk used the technique of reverse stop-motion to animate everyday objects and detritus. This technique, which has been reiterated by music video directors (as discussed later), serves to defamiliarize everyday materials so that viewers experience them as estranged. Despite their relative obscurity within popular culture, the works of these eastern European animators are important precursors to the music videos discussed in this article. In particular, a continuity of strategy and technique can be observed across the films of Švankmajer and popular music video. As we shall see, his film *Byt* exemplifies this continuity, as it is possible to observe the direct influence of this film upon Sigismondi's music video for The Cure's song 'End of the World'.

The music video directors discussed in this article are also influenced by the Pennsylvania-born, United Kingdom-based animators Stephen and Timothy Quay, whose oeuvre overtly shows inspiration drawn from Švankmajer's films. Working across several platforms, including theatrical set design, experimental puppet animations, short and feature length film, television commercials and music video,⁷ the oeuvre of the Brothers Quay exemplifies what I call 'transmedia surrealism' (Perrott

2019b: 194–97). This is where the overt act of crossing mediums develops a type of ‘loose continuity’ through analogy, theme and other-worldly elements, rather than a continuity established via narrative coherence, as is usually observed in studies of ‘transmedia storytelling’ (Bordwell 2009; Jenkins 2009).⁸ The Quay’s dream-like other-worlds contain distinctively surreal details, and these world-building components have been borrowed by several music video directors. For instance, the Quay’s short film *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer* (Griffiths et al. 1984) features a porcelain doll with the crown of its head removed, perhaps an explicit reference to the head-severed porcelain doll featured in Borowczyk’s film *Renaissance*. Very similar looking dolls appear in the music video for Sigur Rós’ song ‘Viðrar vel til loftárása’, (Arnie and Kinski, 2001).⁹ Along with the Quay-esque dolls, the haptic materiality of the *Super 8* film and slow motion imagery produces a similarly dream-like uncanny affect that may conjure subconscious childhood memories. As noted in the introduction to this article, the influence of the Quay’s puppet animations is also particularly evident in the animated music video for Tool’s song ‘Prison Sex’, which remediates the uncanny materiality of the Quay’s animated puppets. To further reinforce the video’s continuity with surrealist animation, ‘Prison Sex’ strongly references specific elements of the Quay’s set design, such as the wall of cabinets featured in their short film *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer* (Figure 2a and 2b). As music video directors in their own right, the Brothers Quay also contributed to some of the animated sequences in the *Sledgehammer* music video (1986).

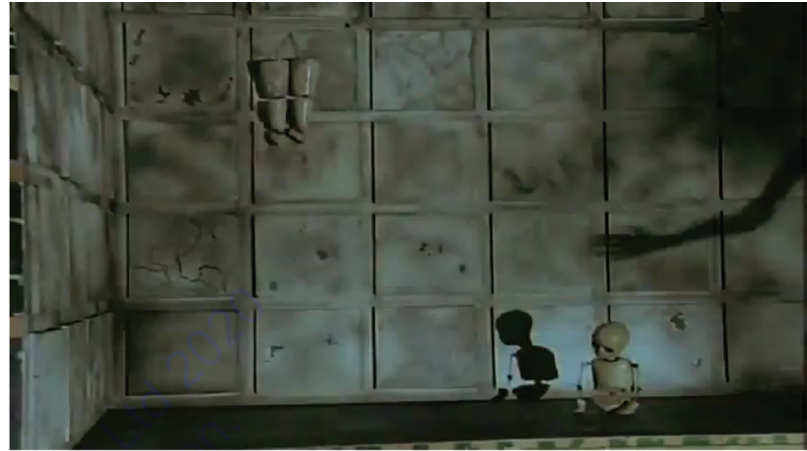
‘Sledgehammer’

One of the most prominent music videos to have popularized and widely disseminated the affective potential of surrealist strategy and experimental animation technique is the video for Peter Gabriel’s song ‘Sledgehammer’ (Stephen R. Johnson 1986). During the 1970s, Gabriel experimented with avant-garde theatrics during his live performances.¹⁰ Continuing his subversive drive during the 1980s, he used the medium of animated music video to experiment with animation technique and surrealist strategies for producing absurdist humour. This was achieved via his collaboration with Johnson, who experimented with a variety of animation techniques across a range of videos for Gabriel and Talking Heads.¹¹

‘Sledgehammer’ exhibits a bricolage of animation techniques; including claymation, pixilation, object animation, chalkboard animation and reverse stop-motion animation. Methods and materials morph from one to another, producing a dizzying sense of transformation and discontinuity. Despite this, a sense of loose continuity is achieved through analogical composition and visual puns that overtly express the absurdity of the lyrics. The animated sequences took place under the supervision of David Sproston, Peter Lord, David Anderson, the Brothers Quay and Aardman Animations’ Peter Lord, Nick Park and Richard Golezowski. In addition to the trademark styles of these animators, the

8. The creative motivations of an artist to work across mediums have tended to be eclipsed by a scholarly emphasis upon transmedia storytelling in relation to franchise development, foundational canons and what Henry Jenkins calls ‘mothership’ projects (Jenkins 2014: 244).
9. Arnie and Kinski is the production company name for Icelandic directors Stefán Árni Þorgeirsson and Sigurður Kjartansson (Siggi Kinski).
10. For example, during a Dublin gig in 1972, he surprised the audience by reappearing onstage wearing a fox’s head and his wife’s red dress (Somers n.d.).
11. See, for instance, Johnson’s music video for Talking Head’s song ‘Road to Nowhere’, and his videos for Peter Gabriel’s songs ‘Big Time’ and ‘Steam’.

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aesthetic composition of the video suggests inspiration has been drawn from an array of avant-garde artists and animators. At the start of the video, a pixilated sequence of extreme close-up shots of Gabriel's face is edited in a jarring style reminiscent of Švankmajer's distinctively haptic and jarring editing combined with his use of close-up shots of pixilated facial gestures.¹² Midway through the video, the animated fruit sequence clearly references the first part of Švankmajer's animated triptych *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1983), as well as the object arrangements of Giuseppe Arcimboldo entitled *Four Seasons* (1563–73), in which portrait heads are composed of objects such as fruit, vegetables, flowers, seeds and tree branches (Figure 3a–3c).

For those unaware of the techniques employed, the video may be perceived simply as a clever collection of references to surrealist art, and tributes to pioneering experimental animators, stitched together to a catchy tune. A kooky sense of fun is enhanced by the sheer variety of styles and techniques combined with the upbeat music and childhood associations triggered by stop-motion animated toy trains and objects such as candy floss. While offering a much lighter viewing experience than the gravitas one would expect from a Švankmajer or Quay film, this levity belies the array of surrealist strategies used throughout the video, all of which rely on specific animation techniques. Gabriel's pixilated facial and bodily gestures create temporal dissonance and an uncanny sense of the human body moving as an automaton. The technique of stop-motion animates everyday objects such as a toy train, a paper dart, popcorn, candyfloss and dancing headless chicken carcasses – an absurdly humorous example of concrete irrationality. The technique of claymation provides transformative instability, as we see Aardman-style plasticine models of Gabriel morphing into grotesque figures (Figure 4a). While the Aardman fingerprint is discernible, some of the claymation segments share a similarly grotesque aesthetic to the plasticine animation of Bruce Bickford, which features in Frank Zappa's music video *City of Tiny Lights* (1979) and in the documentary films *Baby Snakes* (1979) and *Monster Road* (2004) (Figure 4b). This aesthetic of grotesque psychedelia merges with gentler nostalgic associations, with links to children's television shows that depict morphing claymation figures, such as *The Morph Files* (Aardman Animations, 1996), *The Trap Door* (1984–2001), *Take Hart* (1977–84) and *Vision On* (BBC1, 1964–76) – all examples of how experimentation with animation technique and avant-garde strategy was encouraged by a period of commercial and industrial support for 'edgy' programming of the Monty Python ilk.

The surrealist strategies employed in 'Sledgehammer' also rely on animation to assist with multi-modal analogical composition. Animation plays an important part in activating the synaptic relations between musical, lyrical, visual and kinetic modes, assisting these modes to relate to one other via analogy, hyperbole and lyrical-visual puns. For example, lyrics such as 'you could have a steam train' and 'show me round your fruitcage' are accompanied by overly literal visual representations of a stop-animated child's train spiralling around Gabriel's pixilated head and a collection of fruit arranging itself into the shape of his face. Given the degree of word-play and references to body parts

12. See, for instance, Švankmajer's films *Byt*, *Alice* and *Food*, for examples of his distinctively jarring editing of extreme close-ups of body parts.

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13. The Urban Dictionary provides the following urban definition of the term 'fruitcake': 'A funny name for the vagina. Open up your fruitcake where the fruit is as sweet as can be – Peter Gabriel!'. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Fruitcake>. Accessed 8 June 2020.

and sexuality throughout the song, the term 'fruitcake' could be interpreted in the 'urban dictionary' sense as a reference to the vagina.¹³ Observing a degree of surrealist profanity in 'Sledgehammer', John Richardson's (2010) interpretation of the music video is partially informed by Walter Benjamin's notion of 'profane illumination' ([1929] 1978: 179), which has been explored through surrealist practice in conjunction with methods such as stop-motion and object animation. Noting that 'detached body parts and automated human forms were part of the surrealist aesthetic from its early days' (Richardson 2010: 199), Richardson observes how these phenomena are explored in 'Sledgehammer' in two complementary ways: 'the first is the mechanization (and dehumanization) of the human body through the isolation of its parts from the (organic) whole; the second, the investment of inanimate objects (puppets, robots, Claymation figures) with life' (2010: 206). This complementary yet paradoxical combination of using stop-motion animation to dehumanize the human body as well as to give life to inanimate objects, is a prevalent feature of several music videos that incorporate the techniques of pixilation and stop-motion object animation. One notable example of this paradoxical combination is the music video directed by Chris Hopewell for Radiohead's song 'There There' (2008). For this video, Hopewell used pixilation to 'puppetize' and 'objectify' Thom Yorke's body. As a kinetic counterpoint to the robotic illusion created by this method, Hopewell used stop-animation to anthropomorphize puppets closely resembling birds, cats and rodents. Performing the human rituals associated with tea parties and wedding ceremonies, their animated sentient gestures imbue these animals with a paradoxical sense of human agency. As an unwelcome puppetized giant intruding into this animistic miniature eco world, Yorke's dehumanized motion and lack of agency intensifies the sense of audio-visual tonal paradox produced by this music video.

Floria Sigismondi

Another director who has experimented with the paradoxical combination of pixilation and object animation is Floria Sigismondi. Having collaborated with a formidable array of musical and performance artists, Sigismondi has developed a reputation for perplexing audiences and provoking a sense of the uncanny. Populated by performing objects and puppetized humans, interacting with strangely familiar worlds, her work across media embodies a congruence of imagery that is simultaneously familiar and beautiful, yet strange and macabre. Sigismondi engages with the unconscious psyche, mythical archetypes and alchemy, all of which support her intention to transcend normative codes of beauty, gender and identity. She employs surrealist strategies of estrangement and temporal dissonance, which go hand in hand with her use of experimental animation techniques. In the videos discussed below, Sigismondi achieves temporal dissonance by manipulating and alternating modes of cinematic time. She shifts between live action, pixilation and speed-ramping, thus punctuating and disturbing the viewer's perception of 'normal' human motion. Alternating frame

rates, stop-motion techniques and the gestural language of silent cinema are employed to create the illusion of involuntary, syncopated movement closely associated with early twentieth century film projection. These techniques create a sense of temporal dissonance that persists across her work as a distinctive visual-kinetic 'time signature'. A combination of cinematic manipulation of time and her 'directorial practice as a gestural animator' results in an uncanny sense of automatism and dehumanization of human subjects (Perrott 2015: 132). Stripped of human agency, her performers are often represented as possessed by their spatial surroundings, which are imbued with a psychic life force and agency not afforded to the performers themselves.

Sigismondi draws inspiration from a broad array of popular performers and avant-garde artists.¹⁴ Švankmajer's influence upon Sigismondi's work is most apparent by comparing his film *Byt* with her music video for The Cure's song 'End of the World' (2004). Both combine the techniques of pixilation and object animation to invert the 'rational' notion that humans have control over their abode and possessions. Subverting this taken-for-granted illusion of human ascendancy over the physical environment, the flat in which *Byt*'s protagonist resides, along with all of its furnishings and objects, becomes animated by a life force and memory. In an act of concrete irrationality, these usually inanimate objects use their animistic life force to torment the human occupant and expunge his human agency.

'End of the World'

A similar premise underpins Sigismondi's video for 'End of the World'. Like the protagonist in *Byt*, Robert Smith becomes tormented by his surroundings. His house, furnishings and objects exercise their life force in a self-destructive manner, while he moves like an automaton, thus rendering him as an object and implying a sense of victimization. The combination of pixilation and object animation plays an important part in creating these inverted power relations, in which the rational world as we know it is defamiliarized and estranged.

Brought to life by stop-animation, a small doll resembling Smith climbs onto the table to accompany him as he sings. Sitting on the tabletop, the doll watches a milk jug and sugar jar pour their contents off the edge of the table. Frame by frame, Sigismondi has animated the sugar grains so that we see them collectively flowing along the floor and out through a mouse-hole in the skirting board. This revolt of objects spreads throughout the house, infecting and fuelling its animistic 'spirit'. The dirty crockery in the kitchen sink breaks into pieces when the taps turn on of its own volition. Reaching into the fridge to grab an apple, Smith's hand becomes encased in a block of ice. As the ice melts, Smith's coffee cup and spoon dance around the table. The chairs come to life, tumbling out of frame before smashing a hole in the wall. The hole grows bigger, the table legs collapse and the tabletop breaks into pieces on the floor. Books rearrange themselves into higher and lower piles in coordination with the music. Toothpaste squeezes itself from its tube, and a toothbrush shuffles

14. These include: the Brothers Quay, Švankmajer, Francis Bacon, Sarah Moon, Tony Oursler.

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around the sink, applying toothpaste to its bristles. Writhing in his bed, Smith experiences a nightmare he has no control over. The bed covers crawl up the walls, and the wallpaper responds by peeling itself off in large strips (Figure 5b). Smith's gestures are passive, indicating he is powerlessness to stop the destruction of his home. He has less life force than the objects and space encompassing him, which possess the agency of self-destruction – a scenario similar to the inverted agency enabling objects to torment the human character in *Byt* (Figure 5a).

As with her work across photography, sculpture and film, many of Sigismondi's music videos include disembodied dolls, mannequins, puppetized human bodies and references to automatism. They also depict nightmarish otherworldly settings, a tactile materiality of objects, disorientating cinematography and a shallow depth of field, all of which are distinctive features of the Quay's films. The influence Sigismondi gleans from the Quays is evident across her work, but particularly in her videos for the Raconteurs song 'Broken Boy Soldier' (2006), Marilyn Manson's 'Tourniquet' (1996) and David Bowie's 'Little Wonder' (1996).

'Little Wonder'

For 'Little Wonder', Sigismondi and Bowie worked with artistic consultant Tony Oursler to produce visual imagery inspired by the paintings of Francis Bacon and the puppet animations of the Brothers Quay. The surrealist and expressionist affordances of this imagery meld seamlessly with Oursler's artworks, which include anthropomorphized creatures and disembodied body parts. They are absurd caricatures resembling Bacon's distorted painted figures, but when animated they become doll-like. One of the more disturbing images in this video depicts an assortment of doll-like creatures hanging limply from strings, much like an infant's mobile. Although predominantly static, the dolls are animated by their sentient facial gestures, a life force that is extinguished by the image of limp bodies hung by nooses. This macabre suggestion of death is further complicated, since the hanging dolls conjure memories of mobiles dangling above a baby's cot. Early in the video, the younger Bowie plucks an eyeball from a coffee cup. An alien-like mother kisses her baby's head, which topples to the floor, the only visible feature being a projected mouth. These eyeball and mouth motifs reappear in the older Bowie's time zone as a large sphere, humanized by a projected eye and mouth. This bizarre combination of bodily fragmentation and anthropomorphized facial gesture accentuates the resemblance between Oursler's animated dolls and Bowie's puppetized movement. The techniques of pixilation and speed-ramping estrange Bowie's body, making it appear automated or controlled by an off-screen agent. This point is driven home by the final shot. After having wriggled, jerked, danced and flapped his arms like wings, Bowie's body flops limply in time with the song's ending; as a marionette kept alive by an off-screen puppeteer. Having finished playing with her puppet, Sigismondi releases the strings and leaves him to droop lifelessly (Figure 6).

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A narrative of time travel is established as the younger and older versions of Bowie communicate to each other by sending anthropomorphic body parts between time zones. While Bowie's personas connect seamlessly across time, their bodily motion is temporally dislocated. Along with the temporal dissonance created by pixilation, the motion-blurred bodies of the passers-by shape-shift between human forms and transparent shadows, their slippage between presence and absence engendering them as fluid apparitions. Estranged motion, 'reverberating space' (Wood 2006: 135), colour and costume suggest shifting temporal zones and a sense of alienation. These are all facets of Sigismondi's distinctive treatment of cinematic texture and time as mediums, which complements Bowie's sonic manipulation of texture and time and his use of aleatory compositional strategies, including *détournement*.¹⁵

For Bowie, 'Little Wonder' was an experiment with lyric composition as well as with semi-random sonic sampling and rhythmic dissonance. The song's production incorporated a spontaneously playful 'studio vérité' sampling process, resulting in a rhythmically complex composition characterized by abrupt stops and starts, sudden speed ups, slowdowns and unresolved chord arrangements. Incorporating elements of the jungle drum and bass genre, such as stop-time break-beats, syncopated percussive loops, samples, synthesized effects, fast tempos and snare rolls, Bowie created temporal dissonance between the mismatched rhythm of the bass and the drums. The frenetic energy and stop-time of the music is visually complemented by Sigismondi's use of pixilation, alternating camera speeds, time-lapse photography, restless camera movement and shifting depth of field. This unsettling combination of audio-visual jitter, syncopated movement and spatial reverberation is accentuated by shifting sets and composited visual layering. 'Little Wonder' thus served as an ideal temporal experiment for three artists obsessed with estrangement and the medium of time as subversive strategies. Collaboratively driven to animate time and space, Sigismondi, Oursler and Bowie show how the cinematic, material and musical modes of this video operate together as a form of experimental animation.

Conclusion

From the outset, this article opened a window onto the expansive prehistory of animated music video, pointing to the significance of avant-garde traditions as antecedents to the contemporary form. With broad brush strokes, I sketched the key tenets of surrealism and identified why surrealism and experimental animation make compatible bedfellows; practitioners across both realms seek to subvert the laws of rational perception. Thus, surrealist concepts such as concrete irrationality, estrangement and automatism support the aims of experimental animators, while animation techniques such as pixilation, stop-motion, object animation, claymation, puppet animation and gestural animation support the aims of surrealist artists.

15. As with Sigismondi, I have described Bowie as a 'transmedia surrealist' and a puppeteer (Perrott 2019b), a 'cultural alchemist' and a 'gestural animator' (Perrott 2017: 528, 534). These sources include examples of Bowie's use of *détournement* as a lyrical, sonic and visual strategy of estrangement.

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Popular cultural forms such as music video are often considered to be functionally divergent and aesthetically incompatible to the practices of fine artists and avant-gardists. However, the examples discussed here show how music video directors collaborate with popular artists to tap into a strong lineage of surrealist tradition. Not only do these video directors portray an impressive knowledge of surrealist art, their practice is infused with surrealist strategies that invigorate their experimental process. Surrealist methods combine with experimental animation techniques and popular music to create innovative audio-visual forms that smash the barriers between old and new, high and low and analogue and digital.

The directors discussed here have pioneered new approaches to the construction of animated music video. The videos created by these directors are instructive for their engagement with the history of experimental animation and their contemporization of surrealist tenets that were originally practised in response to culturally and politically specific moments in history. Rather than using the term surrealist to articulate the methods used in these music videos, it might be more accurate to follow in the footsteps of John Richardson, and describe them as 'neosurrealist' remediations of the animated films that inspired these directors (2012: 35). As Richardson explains, an essential aspect of this idea of the neosurreal is a principle the historical surrealists consistently expounded: the capacity of surrealist acts, performances or objects to bring about altered perceptions of the world – to help us to imagine afresh' (2012: 35). Ultimately, the directors discussed here have achieved this idea of the neosurreal by refreshing our imagination of worlds beyond the mind's eye. They demonstrate a propensity to transcend normative identity codes and subvert the conventions of popular music video, thus subverting, enriching and expanding a form that has been neglected by scholars and art critics alike. In bed with surrealism, experimental animation has germinated the seed that has transformed music video.

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Suggested citation

Perrott, Lisa (2021), 'Experimental animation and the neosurrealist remediation of popular music video', *Animation Practice, Process & Production*, 8, pp. 93–116, https://doi.org/10.1386/ap3_00006_1

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