

## *Come to Daddy? Claiming Chris Cunningham for British Art Cinema*

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### **Abstract:**

Twenty years after he came to prominence via a series of provocative, ground-breaking music videos, Chris Cunningham remains a troubling, elusive figure within British visual culture. His output – which includes short films, advertisements, art gallery commissions, installations, music production and a touring multi-screen live performance – is relatively slim, and his seemingly slow work rate (and tendency to leave projects uncompleted or unreleased) has been a frustration for fans and commentators, particularly those who hoped he would channel his interests and talents into a full-length ‘feature’ film project. There has been a diverse critical response to his musical sensitivity, his associations with UK electronica culture – and the Warp label in particular – his working relationship with Aphex Twin, his importance within the history of the pop video and his deployment of transgressive, suggestive imagery involving mutated, traumatised or robotic bodies. However, this article makes a claim for placing Cunningham within discourses of British art cinema. It proposes that the many contradictions that define and animate Cunningham’s work – narrative versus abstraction, political engagement versus surrealism, sincerity versus provocation, commerce versus experimentation, art versus craft, a ‘British’ sensibility versus a transnational one – are also those that typify a particular terrain of British film culture that falls awkwardly between populism and experimentalism.

**Keywords:** British art cinema; Chris Cunningham; cinematic bodies; film and music; music video.

Towards the end of Chris Cunningham's disorientating short film *Rubber Johnny* (2005), the flesh of the titular character – a grotesquely deformed man/child played by the director himself under layers of prosthetics – appears to explode repeatedly onto the camera lens.<sup>1</sup> The frenetic editing and electronic score momentarily slows down to allow the viewer to perceive a series of unsettling tableaux of rearranged body parts and unidentifiable viscera. It so happens that the reassembled body is the dominant motif of Cunningham's moving image work of the twenty-first century. Elsewhere, in his video for the 2006 song 'Sheena Is a Parasite' by The Horrors, a woman interrupts her feverish dancing to the music with a dress-lifting manoeuvre that seems to direct her unleashed innards directly towards the camera. In *Spectral Musicians* (c.2011), shown to date only as part of Cunningham's live performances, incision marks are tracked along a child's body before it implodes in a blaze of light, as if subject to an alien invasion and autopsy. In his looped video installation piece *Flex* (2000), a naked man and woman, suspended in a watery space, lock into a rhythm that alternates between intimacy and the brutalisation of each other's flesh.

These depictions of unstable, brutalised bodies are useful encapsulations of Cunningham's anatomical obsessions and attraction towards transgressive imagery. But they are equally suggestive of his body of creative work, which is similarly messy, decentred, fractured. In the examples given above, Cunningham's interest lies not merely in the evisceration of the human form, but its reassembly; his productions often describe rhythmic cycles of implosion and restoration. There is a warning, perhaps, for anyone attempting to impose coherence or categorisation upon a body of work defined so strongly by a tension between order and chaos.

Twenty years after he came to prominence via a series of provocative, ground-breaking music videos, Cunningham (who was born in 1970) remains an elusive figure within British visual culture. His output – which includes short films, advertisements, art gallery commissions, installations, music production and a touring multiscreen live performance – is relatively slim, and his seemingly slow work rate (and tendency to leave projects uncompleted or unreleased) has been a frustration for fans and commentators, particularly those who hoped he would channel his interests and talents into a full-length ‘feature’ film project.<sup>2</sup> He has certainly not lacked critical acclaim and recognition, and there has been a diverse response to his musical sensitivity, his associations with UK electronica culture (and the Warp label in particular), his working relationship with Aphex Twin, his importance within the history of the pop video and his deployment of transgressive, suggestive imagery involving mutated, traumatised or robotic bodies.

Such is his creative idiosyncrasy, few would dispute Cunningham’s singularity as an artist, even when querying his worth and significance. But there has been less agreement on exactly which artistic or industrial contexts his work fits within most comfortably. Diane Railton and Paul Watson, in their analysis of the music video form, acknowledge Cunningham, as do many others, as a video auteur, but warn that the ‘unearthing of thematic and stylistic consistencies across numerous instances of any one [music video] director’s output is incredibly rare’; furthermore, the anomalous notion of a video author risks reducing the form to a ‘sub-genre of film’ (2011: 68), marginalising the role of music, performance and other creative personnel. Alternatively, one might query whether the term ‘music video’ is a sufficient descriptor of productions such as *Rubber Johnny* and *Flex* that are not dominated by a single track (or named after one), yet are still ‘attuned to music’ (Fetveit 2011: 173). Indeed, commentaries on his output – whether academic discussion or YouTube

comments on uploads/recordings – often betray a desire to project a straightforward trajectory upon his career, or to claim him for a particular sphere of creativity. Thus, for example, the film-maker Richard Stanley, in a survey of contemporary developments in horror cinema written for an academic anthology, noted Cunningham's beginnings in the realm of technical effects for fantasy cinema, and anticipated (wrongly) that his late 1990s music videos would augur a return to genre film-making (2002: 187–8). He was not the only observer to witness Cunningham's feeding on the 'extremes of cinematic shorthand' (Hanson 2006: 15), which also extended to science fiction (*All Is Full of Love* (1998)), film noir (*Only You* (1997)) and British social realism (*No More Talk* (1997)). In contrast, the art curator Norman Rosenthal, in justification of his inclusion of Cunningham's aptly named video installation *Flex* in his Apocalypse exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2000, described him as a 'celebrated young maker of advertising and music videos, who is now choosing quite deliberately to enter the discourse of contemporary art' (2000: 28).

While this may well have been true, in retrospect this 'legit gallery status' (Romney 2005: 34) is debateable, given that Cunningham's subsequent activities, for all their possible engagement with tropes and developments within contemporary art practice, have mostly taken place beyond the establishments and spaces associated with it. The picture is further complicated by the (one assumes) author-endorsed statements on the back cover of his commercially released *Rubber*

*Johnny* DVD (with accompanying booklet of 'original artwork'), which describes the six-minute work as a 'hallucinatory experimental video' by 'the UK's most imaginative filmmaker'. Although 'experimental video' is used here partly in reference to Cunningham's continuing collaboration with the electronic musician Aphex Twin, and therefore

to emphasise the product's kinship with music culture (and electronica in particular), the word 'experimental' is of course loaded with associations of radical, avant-garde activity, and in this context 'video' casts off its connections with the pop music industry and instead links to a tradition of British video art.

Published interviews and profiles have frequently evoked – if not directly stated – the obvious parallels between Cunningham's attraction to shape-shifting imagery and disorientating, animation-like editing strategies, and his own professional fluidity between media, genres and artistic worlds; for Laura Frahm, for example, his work can be conceived as a 'permanent reflection about a world that is in a state of endless flux' (2015: 163). Profiles of Cunningham tend to describe his early work in special effects production, starting when he was still a teenager. He was involved in design and technical roles on *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (1988) and *Nightbreed* (1990), and was the main alien sculptor on *Alien 3* (1992), before Stanley Kubrick employed him to lead a robot design department on the pre-production of *A.I.* (eventually directed by Steven Spielberg). During his time on *A.I.*, he developed an interest in the synchronisation of music and movement and moved into music video production as a tentative step towards film-making. In the accompanying booklet to the 2003 compilation DVD *The Work of Chris Cunningham*, issued as part of the 'Directors Label' series (which also included Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, Jonathan Glazer, Anton Corbijn and Mark Romanek), he told an interviewer: 'I love anatomy. I love the human form, I always have. That's why I got into painting and sculpting, that's why I became interested in prosthetics and why I make films about bodies. The one thing that was missing was sound' (Cunningham 2003).

After a self-funded video for the electronic music act Autechre, involving an insect-like machine, proved disappointing, through his inability to turn a visually abstract idea into a piece of film, he gained a number of commissions for videos and advertisements. In interviews, he has devalued much of this work, citing a perfectionist and uncompromising streak that made mainstream commissions for the likes of Madonna difficult, and openly expressing in the accompanying booklet his disappointment with some of the eight examples he selected for the 'Directors Label' DVD. He has also expressed frustration that, in the age of YouTube, he cannot exercise control over dissemination, complaining that: 'If there's something you've done it'll be on the fucking internet' (Dombal 2005). In 1999 he announced a transition from music videos to film direction, but a planned adaptation of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) was as ultimately fruitless as other feature projects to which he would allude in the next fifteen years. Originally intended as a short film for FilmFour, but seemingly unviable because of its content (Bidder 2000), *Flex* was ultimately commissioned by the Anthony D'Offay gallery. Although he distinguished it at the time from the 'puerility' and comedic impulses of previous collaborations with Aphex Twin, he also emphasised that 'at the end of the day I just make films and this is just another venue'.

But he would again express disappointment with the realisation of *Flex*, including only three minutes of the seventeen-minute running length on his DVD, and in an interview with Sean O'Hagan in the *Guardian*, 18 April 2010, he described his move into live performance from 2005 onwards – with shows consisting of a three-screen live 'mix' and re-edit of released and unreleased work – as 'the closest I can get to what I want to do: the visceral sound of a live show but massive screens like a cinema'. He has also rejected the benefits of egalitarian online platforms such as YouTube in disseminating his work to a wide

audience, instead lamenting to O'Hagan the decontextualisation and loss of image quality involved: 'Why spend three years on a short film for it to end up being shown out-of-sync on a shitty format?' Promoting his 2012 multimedia *Jaqapparatus* installation for Audi City, Cunningham seemed resigned to his outsider status: 'What I'm doing these days doesn't really fit anywhere. A film company wouldn't [fund me] because it doesn't fit their business model. That's why people say, "What have you been doing?"' (Anon. 2012).

As illustrated by such interview statements about his resistance to the expectations of his becoming a 'director' in the traditional sense of a feature-length storyteller, Cunningham's career lacks a tidy narrative of creative evolution. The 1990s is now recognised as a boom period for UK music video production, an era in which the 'character and quantity of music videos produced were stimulated by the policies of British terrestrial programmers and by the emergence of a new generation of independent film-makers who sought pleasure within their artisanal practice' (Caston 2014: 13). However, Cunningham has not followed the pathways of others who used advertisements and music videos as a nursery slope for a commercial directing career (such as Ridley Scott, Guy Ritchie and Jonathan Glazer), or who 'graduated' from intellectually orientated or personal short films to 'arthouse' features (for example, Peter Greenaway, Sally Potter and Lynn Ramsay). As tempting as it might be to celebrate Cunningham as a maverick presence without obvious parallel or precedent in British popular culture, I want instead to draw him into discourses around British art cinema. I will offer various definitions of art cinema in due course, but my argument here is indebted to recent scholarship responding sensitively to the various currents and impulses that characterise contemporary British cinema. My proposition is that the many contradictions that define and animate Cunningham's work – narrative versus abstraction, political

engagement versus surrealism, sincerity versus provocation, commerce versus experimentation, art versus craft, a 'British' sensibility versus a transnational one – are also those that typify a particular terrain of British film culture that falls awkwardly between populism and experimentalism.

*From music videos to art cinema: figures and landscape*

Defining a national variant of the already contested concept of art cinema is no easy task. European art cinema has tended to be defined in terms of a rejection of the style and storytelling methods of Hollywood cinema, or as a strategic institutional response by European film-makers. Although it is difficult to find equivalences in British film culture to the various mid-century European movements associated with broader artistic and literary developments, it is possible to locate a current of sophistication and exploration in British film culture, even if film-makers were moving against the tide. As Brian Hoyle (2012) notes, both the influential documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the less internationally significant 'kitchen sink' new wave of the 1950s and 1960s, contrasted sharply with the modernist experiments of contemporaneous continental film-makers. Buoyed in part by the arrival of Channel 4, the 1980s was a productive period for directors such as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Sally Potter, Terence Davies and Mike Leigh, many of whom graduated from avant-garde or low budget work in the previous decade. For John Hill, this wave of film-makers made it 'much easier to identify a recognisably British art cinema and see it as a significant strand of British and, indeed, European filmmaking' (2000: 18). For Hoyle, British art cinema of the last quarter of the twentieth century can be characterised on the one hand as a 'belated continuation of classic European art cinema



but also a significant development from it' (2006: 15–16), consisting of 'consciously eclectic' films, 'each blending a wide variety of influences, genres, film-making styles and techniques' (ibid.: 272).

However, some of the most singular talents that emerged in the 1990s (for example, Patrick Keiller, Andrew Köttling and Lynne Ramsay) struggled as much as the older generation to sustain a career in feature film-making in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Furthermore, this 'golden age' narrative was challenged in an article in the *Guardian*, 24 July 2009, by Andrew Pulver, which cited emerging film-makers such as Peter Strickland, Gideon Koppel, Joanna Hogg, Thomas Clay, Andrea Arnold and Duane Hopkins, and identified a revitalisation of British art cinema, albeit one defined by eclecticism, cine-literacy and an embrace of digital culture rather than by any shared aesthetic. Pulver quotes a comment by the managing director of Warp Films, Robin Gutch, suggesting that their work was united by a desire to 'purify the medium rather than being avant-garde'. For Tanya Horeck, this twenty-first century wave of British art cinema shares an interest in 'questions of sensation and embodiment' and in so doing connects with a broader development of 'new extremism and its stylised provocations' (2011:169) in European art-house cinema, with its exploitation of 'cinema's intensely tactile quality' (Beugnet 2007: 3). The level of contribution by British filmmakers to the French-led corpus of European films that have 'attracted attention for their graphic and confrontational images of sex and violence' (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 1) is debatable, and it is not easy to locate obvious affinities with the work of directors such as Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Lars von Trier and Ulrich Seidl, despite the sexual explicitness of films such as *Intimacy* (2001) and *9 Songs* (2004).

However, Horeck identifies certain kinships with the ‘poetic social realist art cinema’ (2011: 170) of Andrea Arnold, where ‘poetic, affective moments . . . offer insight into social relations’ (ibid.: 171). If a hallmark of ‘extreme’ European film-making has been a tendency to combine an art cinema aesthetic with ‘shock tactics traditionally associated with gore, porn and horror’ (Beugnet 2007: 36), then it is perhaps easier to identify a ‘reverse’ movement in British cinema: the revival of popular horror cinema. Although too broad-ranging to be reduced to key tropes, some of the key films, such as *Eden Lake* (2008) and *28 Days Later* (2002), have been those with a ‘realist’ attention to landscape and spatial tensions. It is tempting to identify Cunningham as both outlier and bridge between these various developments. On the one hand, *Come to Daddy* (1997) is eerily prophetic of a later ‘hoodie horror’ cycle of British films exploiting associations around dangerous youth (Walker 2015). On the other, if the ‘new extremism’ movement was characterised by, in James Quandt’s much-quoted description, ‘rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm’ (2011: 18), then Cunningham’s *Flex*, with its close-ups of genitalia, sexual acts, and highly stylised blood-letting, is one of the few British examples of wilful transgression in this era outside of generic or avant-garde film-making. Indeed, in words that actually anticipate Quandt, Cunningham (2004) described *Flex* in 2003 as a work encompassing ‘blood, muscles, heavy breathing, spunk and God’.

Certain contemporary directors, such as Ben Rivers (*Two Years at Sea* (2011)) and Duane Hopkins (*Better Things* (2008)), have notably produced work for art galleries and cinemas whereas various established figures in contemporary art, like Steve McQueen (*Hunger* (2008)), Sam Taylor-Wood (*Nowhere Boy* (2009)), Douglas Gordon (*Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006)), Tracey Emin (*Topspot* (2004)) and Banksy (*Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010)), have crossed into commercial film-making. Writing in 1999, around the time of

Cunningham's gravitation towards exhibition spaces, A. L. Rees noted the rise of 'gallery video', and in 2011 he described how 'many exhibitions of contemporary art have been dominated by digital screens and film loops' (2011: vi). In relation to the mid-1990s wave of 'young British artists', Rees identified the utilisation of film and video in ways more indebted to the 'sounds and icons of TV and mainstream cinema' (ibid.: 132) than to histories of avant-garde, structuralist cinema. In relation to the subsequent trend for artists migrating into mainstream or documentary features, symptomatic of what Amy Sargeant (2012: 519) describes as a 'culture where art and artists have become the subject of common currency and widespread popular commentary' (Sargeant 2012: 519), she notes a pattern of exchange involving a 'decisive crossing of borders, to and fro, with all the territorial anxiety that activity implies, on either side, for artists and critics alike' (ibid.: 503). The blurring of categorical boundaries suggested by Sargeant in relation to the visibility of "'artists' films", contemporary and retrospective, in formats shared with regular features and television' (ibid.: 519) can of course also be witnessed in the circulation and popular reception of Cunningham's work. His videos have been anthologised across a range of platforms: for example, his work has been featured in the Channel 4 television series *Mirrorball* (1999–2001) which showcases video auteurs (the show developed out of an event at the Edinburgh Film Festival), the *Bug* events (2007–) at the British Film Institute (and elsewhere) tracing the evolution of music video, the aforementioned 'Directors Label' DVD release, Tate Britain's 2003–4 retrospective 'A Century of Artists Film in Britain', and other galleries and spaces. And to illustrate its simultaneous absorption within both the popular and critical imagination, one might reference the inclusion of *Come to Daddy* in the audience-pollled Channel 4 show *The 100 Greatest Scary Moments* (2003) – a countdown mostly of filmic and television examples – and at the top of the taste-making *Pitchfork* website's list of the 'top 50 music videos of the 1990s'.<sup>3</sup>

Rees's description of the video art of the contemporary era as 'more pictorialist than materialist' (2011: 132) strengthens the case made by a number of scholars of British visual culture (Orr 2012; Hockenhull 2014) for a historical affinity between art and film-making, and in particular the predominance of a 'Romantic and Sublime vocabulary' (Hockenhull 2014: 17) that suggests a lineage between eighteenth-century painting and contemporary British cinema. In her aesthetic analysis of how recent British films have elicited an emotional response through their conscious or unconscious use of landscape, Stella Hockenhull has identified certain common impulses that unite a number of generically variable texts; for example, various films in the social realist tradition have conveyed states of 'liminality, disconnection and self-reflection' through the Romantic vocabulary of the landscape, whereas horror films have typically portrayed landscapes as a 'hostile and primitive space' (ibid.: 30). Hockenhull's main concern is a 'pastoral lineage' (ibid.: 24), which is admittedly difficult to extend to an indigenous tradition of music video, let alone to Cunningham.

Nevertheless, a correspondence can be made between the ways in which a 'pictorialist' British cinema positions figures suggestively in rural and urban landscapes and the juxtaposition of bodies and spaces in music video. Cunningham, however, has tended to be defined in terms of a post-industrial reinvention of Gothicism. Michael Bracewell considers both his futuristic, clinical vision of erotically embracing robots in *All Is Full of Love* and his 2003 PlayStation advert featuring a digitally altered young woman as redolent of the 'postmodern fairy tale', stemming from the compensatory need for 'tales of mystery and imagination in a world increasingly explained by science'. In this way, his borrowings

from fantasy genres suggest ‘stories which seem to articulate the relation to human feelings to the mysteries and myths of our technologically accelerating age’ (2000: 148).

In her discussion of Cunningham in relation to a strand of music videos that ‘propose references to the manifestations of past artistic avant-gardes’ (Turim 2007: 85), Maureen Turim identifies a tension within his work between ‘figurative bodies and narratives on one hand, and abstract visual impulses on the other’ (ibid.: 98). Thus, while his recurrent imagery of fragmented or mutated bodies connects with traditions of surrealist art, there is also scope for symbolic readings. *Afrika Shox* (1998), for instance, can be interpreted as a commentary on both the economic underclass and US race relations in its portrayal of a ragged, haunted-looking black man in the financial district of New York having his limbs shattered like porcelain as he comes into contact with authority figures who barely register his presence. *Windowlicker* (1999), Cunningham’s playful deconstruction of tropes from contemporaneous hip-hop and R&B videos is predicated upon the grotesque conceit of a coterie of bikini-clad female dancers each with the bearded face of Richard D. James (that is, Aphex Twin) – a ‘dadaist gag’ (Shaughnessy 2005: 81) carried forward from the preceding Aphex collaboration *Come to Daddy*, and rooted in James’s previous iconisation of his own face in cover art and videos.

Given the ubiquity of the ‘big-bosomed bikini girl’ (O’Reilly 1999) in hip-hop videos, and the ethnicity of the majority of the performances, it is not surprising that it attracted accusations of racism and sexism (O’Reilly 1999; Adams 2014). However, it could be claimed that this tension between abstraction and figuration is hardly unique to Cunningham, being merely a manifestation of a broader conflict between understandings of music

videos as either primarily 'narrative' or 'anti-narrative' in impulse. In her detailed study of the form, Carol Vernallis acknowledges a schism in prior scholarship between those who claim that music videos mostly work narratively, drawing on techniques from a Bordwellian definition of Hollywood cinema, and those who detect instead a 'kind of postmodern pastiche that gains energy from defying narrative conventions' (2004: xi). According to the latter approach, given that a video 'offers no critical distance from the genre being parodied' (Lola Young, cited in O'Reilly 1999), a challenging example such as *Windowlicker* may be closer to pastiche than to satire, but achieves its shock effect through its novel and unsettling deconstructive tactics. For Vernallis, it is more fruitful to place videos within a continuum from strong to anti-narrative, and to recognise that any 'story' exists 'only in the dynamic relation between the song and the image as they unfold in time' (2004: 4). In relation to Cunningham, Vernallis notes how his work functions narratively in conveying a 'sense of threat through the fracture, transformation, or faulty workings of machines and bodies' (2013: 275).

Arguing that 'Cunningham's interest in anatomy and music is particular to him as a director', Tristan Fidler identifies in a number of his videos a 'pessimistic view of urban space . . . represented both in the forms of anatomy residing there and the damaging consequences the city has for the human extensions of its structural space' (2007: 130). Fidler draws upon the Lacanian-inspired premise of the imaginary body and its incorporation into the 'cinematic body', arguing that: 'For Cunningham, the meaning of the body of the symbolic order is one of disruption and destabilisation, which is determined by the alternatively melancholic and assaulting music he chooses' (ibid.: 126). For Fidler, Cunningham's auteurist signature is partly the remediation of cinematic genres, most notably horror and action where the 'visceral

transfiguration' of the body is a means to impel or shock audiences, within the 'television genre of the music video' (ibid.: 128).

What is evident from the analyses of Fidler, Thumin, Bracewell and others is that the affiliations between Cunningham's work and wider currents in either art or popular culture are fundamentally related to his articulation of bodies in conflict with the environment.

But, as I will demonstrate through the following detailed analysis of one of his videos, his *oeuvre* itself – a body of work pulled critically and generically in many different directions – can be understood as emblematic of a tradition of exploratory British film-making that resists comprehension in terms of lineage or linear development.

### *Come to Daddy*

Filmed on a council estate in Thamesmead in East London, *Come to Daddy* is for me Cunningham's most identifiably 'indigenous' production in terms of its iconography and its engagement with associative ideas around delinquency and 'media effects' within the British popular imagination (albeit not exclusively). Although comfortably classified as a music video, given its role in promoting an EP of the same name by Aphex Twin, *Come to Daddy* introduces right from the start a subtle challenge to video orthodoxy by imposing the name of the director, musician and title almost subliminally over the images via quick flashes and muted colours. Moreover, the familiar Aphex Twin symbol – a branding logo that carries no other discernible referents – is seen rapidly to switch back and forth to a sign (reminiscent of the kind associated with public lavatory signs) suggesting the human form; this anticipates not only the forthcoming imagery but also the video's broader tension between abstraction and figuration.

The six-minute video begins with suspenseful establishing shots – accompanied by unsettling electronic sounds – of a grey, concrete tower block and the arrival of a vulnerable-looking elderly woman whose large dog sniffs around a pile of rubbish and then urinates on a small, abandoned television set. This brings to life a digitally shifting image of a face on the screen, that of Richard James, and the music track’s ‘horror jungle’ (Young 2005: 78) begins with his aggressively processed voice screaming ‘I want your soul’. This draws the attention of a group of ‘little people’ (henceforth Aphex children), all with James’s ‘trademark leer’ (Matthews 2004), and signified as either female or male by way of their school uniform or parka coat (a nod perhaps to cult British evocations of ‘mod’ culture, most notably *Quadrophenia* (1979)), who run amok, squabble and scare a resident in a parking area. The television with James’s face is accidentally dropped and this unleashes the ‘birth’ through a membranous screen of a skeletal, human-like creature, which then – and now with the familiar James face – stands proudly over its disciple-like ‘children’ in a fog that obscures any sense of a particular location. The last 40 seconds of the video rapidly cut between the creature moving jerkily and abstract flashes of the preceding imagery: the TV face, static, the terrified old woman, the tower blocks, light flashes, splashes and the rampaging Aphex children. At one point, the creature has its hands over its head in a cowed position, as if mirroring the viewer’s own subjugation to the video’s overwhelming sonic and visual assault; furthermore, it is seen at one point wearing a cloth over its genitalia that could either be an infantilising nappy or a loin-cloth, reinforcing a reading of the creature as a suffering Jesus figure.

Although the video is mostly edited associatively to the harsh rhythms of the music rather than in accordance with traditional cinematic continuity style, there are instances of shot-reverse-shot constructs in order to convey point of view and to evoke suspense or threat. For



example, before Aphex children are unveiled, a series of shots draw on the horror/thriller convention of an unseen observer – signified by a slightly obscured view from where the woman senses a movement. The sticky birth of the television creature, an evident homage to *Videodrome* (1983), clearly connects with a tradition of anatomically focused ‘body horror’ linked with the likes of Cronenberg and Clive Barker; the creature is revealed incrementally through fragmentary images that generate anxiety about its form and what it might do to the woman.<sup>4</sup>

For Tristan Fidler, drawing upon paradigms relating to the construction of the cinematic body, *Come to Daddy* is emblematic of Cunningham’s ‘pessimistic’ vision – as seen elsewhere in *Only You* and *Afrika Shox* – of the ‘human body and urban space as engaged in a negative relationship that is filled with tension and unease’ (2007: 130). The Aphex children thus personify an experience of alienation in the estate through their physically and socially disruptive behaviour, while the television creature is also left alone and alienated, emphasising a general ‘sense of uneasiness in the face of the spectacular Other’ (ibid.: 141). However, to interpret *Come to Daddy* as merely a ‘scream against urban decay’ (Hanson 2006: 15) is too reductive a reading of its more complex interrogation of anxieties in the British popular imagination relating to council estates, places that have been exploited in print and visual media as ‘ciphers . . . shorthand to make a point about the society we live in’ (Hanley 2007: 183). By the time of *Come to Daddy*, the council estate was firmly established as a recurrent setting for a certain strain of socially concerned British film-making with an ambivalent stance on questions of agency and entrapment: one might contrast, for example, the way that characters are overwhelmed by their environment in Ken Loach’s *Raining Stones* (1993) with the entitlement of the strutting teenage girls of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* (1987). With its playful rather than didactic approach, *Come to Daddy*, however, is better

appreciated as a precursor to ‘fanciful’ representations such as the comedic television drama *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004–13) and the horror film *Attack the Block* (2011) that largely eschew naturalism yet still intervene in political debates around the ‘underclass’. Although the video is atypical of Cunningham in its deployment of a recognisable ‘real-world’ setting, the estate offers an ideal platform for his signature fusion of figuration and abstraction.

The council estate has been defined as a ‘meeting of architectural modernism with the ideals of the British welfare state’ (Taunton 2010: 176) and Cunningham finds an equivalence to the track’s sonic violence in compositions and editing that exploit the brutalist lines and shapes of the setting, while using characters to suggest a scenario of alternative paternal protection to that of the state. At one point, towards the end of the video, a shot of the walls of the estate becomes unexpectedly subject to a degradation effect, as if the interference hitherto seen on the television monitor has transferred, like the creature within, to the ‘real’ world. Although the effect contributes to the video’s progressive blurring of mediated and unmediated realities, it also alludes to the surveillance of public spaces through CCTV technology, or at least the breakdown of such monitoring.

Through its depiction of physical entities that blur ‘their classification as child or adult’ (Fidler 2007: 135), *Come to Daddy* complicates a straightforward reading of its narrative in terms of media effects. While it is the aggressive imagery on the television set that gives birth to a monstrous, physical threat to the elderly woman (who can be taken to represent the wider social fabric here) and seemingly impels the Aphex children towards delinquency, the television creature also brings calm and unity to the children. For the British viewer at least, these elements of *Come to Daddy* may bring to mind the ‘video nasty’ scare of the early 1980s relating to fears about the possible impact upon children of explicit,

unregulated content (see Egan 2007). Interestingly, Cunningham himself has outlined, in the context of the British Board of Film Classification's imposition of age-ratings on online videos, the formative impact of 'extreme' material on his own creativity:

I used to watch video nasties. Was that a bad idea? I don't know, but being able to make that decision for yourself is magical . . . As a kid, I didn't really distinguish between looking through a book on surrealist painters, a book on how Tom Savini did gore effects, or a music video. It's all art to me . . . For a while, music videos were a replacement of what avant-garde cinema was doing. If you wanted to see anything avant-garde, or surreal, you'd more likely see it in a music video than a movie. (Monroe 2015)

However, the song 'Come to Daddy' tends to be regarded in part as a parodic swipe at 'electro-rock dance hits' of the time, particularly The Prodigy's 1996 techno hit 'Firestarter' (Fidler 2007: 131). And as mentioned earlier, the video was also the continuation of Aphex Twin's use of his own 'face and body [in cover art and videos] in a bludgeoning attack on the over-cosmeticized imagery of contemporary pop' (Shaughnessy 2005: 81). In this respect, Rob Young notes how Richard James's discomfort with his growing reputation led to a 'conscious decision to fight back by shredding his image, chopping into digital images of his own, making himself appear like a smudged loon' (2005: 77–8). A notable precursor to Cunningham's video is David Slade's promo for Aphex Twin's 'Donkey Rhubarb' (1995), which also has an urban backdrop and features three people, all in furry 'bear' outfits customised with the identical, flat faces of the musician, who romp, squabble and make sexual gestures – including a 'hipthrust' manoeuvre that is repeated (the intertextuality is presumably deliberate) by one of the Aphex children in *Come to Daddy*. Although

utterly unforeseen, the creatures here, sometimes filmed interacting with ‘real’ children, are oddly reminiscent of the characters on the BBC children’s TV show *Teletubbies*, which first aired in 1997. Given that *Teletubbies* and *Come to Daddy* both share a conceit of child-like figures who receive and internalise video broadcasts, it is perhaps not too farfetched to suggest that Aphex Twin and Cunningham are channelling a broader idea in both popular culture and postmodern theory about children and cultural formation. Indeed, Jonathan Bignell’s analysis of *Teletubbies* as casting childhood as both familiar and alien has some application to *Come to Daddy*, particularly in how it ‘poses television as a mediator of the uncertain boundaries between adulthood and childhood, familiar and alien, human and inhuman’ (2005: 374).

#### *Conclusion: comedy and perceptual challenge*

Carol Vernallis’s rhetorical question about whether Cunningham’s disquieting effects come from his working ‘with taboo subject positions’ or merely from a ‘subtle mean streak’ (2013: 275) can be answered partly via his claims that his impulses have often been comedic.

With regard to his repeated use of children or child-like figures – for example in *Come to Daddy*, *Only You*, *Come on My Selector* (1998), *Spectral Musicians* and *Rubber Johnny* – it is feasible to relate this to a late 1990s trend in European art cinema for stories dealing with fears and compulsions around the death or loss of a child. But there is a more appropriate kinship with the era’s dark and morally inscrutable television and radio comedy, particularly Chris Morris’s music-driven *Blue Jam* (BBC, Radio 1, 1997–9) which, as well as prominently featuring tracks by Aphex Twin and other ambient electronic acts, also featured unsettling scenarios involving traumatised, sexualised or dead children. A key sketch, also repeated in the television adaptation *Jam* (Channel 4, 2000), portrays a bereaved

mother begging a plumber to 'fix' her baby with hot pipes.<sup>5</sup> The shows attributed to Morris, including the controversial 'Paedophilia' special of *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 28 July 2001), are characterised by a tension between satirical and surrealist intent in the way that they allow for interpretation as a sustained commentary on the sanctity of parenthood/childhood while also tilting at subjects normally taboo for grotesque imagery and tonal effects – analogous, as we have seen, with Cunningham's collapsing of figuration and abstraction.

These tensions are particularly prominent in *Rubber Johnny*, which begins with close-ups, shot in infrared, of a face that could be either that of a baby or an animal. A soothing male voice off-screen, which could be that of a father or of some kind of institutional figure, asks the baby talking creature if it wants its 'Mummy' to come. After a brief credit sequence showing a condom being pulled off a penislike shape – highly allusive given the title's reference to a slang phrase for male contraception – we are introduced to the 'adult' Johnny, still in the same dark room (or one similar) and still foetus-like, with his disproportionately bulbous head hanging over his wheelchair. As Jonathan Romney observes, the initial section 'hints at more serious intentions to suggest themes of language and disability' (2005: 35) and the subsequent verbal threat that Johnny receives from an offscreen male – 'You great twat, you' – lends weight to possible narratives of failed contraception, abusive parents and monstrous children. However, the creature's utterance of the word 'Aphex', with its obvious intertextual associations, initiates the final 'splatterdance' sequence (ibid.: 2005: 36) where any satirical intention is overwhelmed by the desire by the creators to 'operate at, and slightly beyond, the threshold of human perception' (Fetveit 2011: 177).

It is precisely this perceptual challenge that has hitherto daunted analyses of Cunningham, whether in terms of representational politics, generic affiliation or relationship with avant-

garde art. Cunningham's long-anticipated 'feature' film may never see the light of day and while there are some who would consider that a creative loss, this has also had implications for the categorisation and reception of his work to date. One avenue of potential analysis to which this article has only briefly alluded is Cunningham's consonance with a tradition of sonically sensitive British cinema. Surprisingly, perhaps, for a cinema so often identified through pictorialist or literary impulses, we might claim a kind of 'musicality' – in the sense of an innate visual responsiveness to sound and music – as a glue that binds Cunningham with the otherwise mixed company of Humphrey Jennings, Powell and Pressburger, Terence Davies, Derek Jarman, Nicolas Roeg and Jonathan Glazer. Of course, aligning him with an admittedly inscrutable tradition of British art cinema is not unproblematic, as we have seen. But it is a useful illustration of how threshold-crossing films and film-makers can expose qualities and concerns that assist a comprehension, if not quite a definition, of a national film culture.

## Notes

1. As I discuss in this article, Cunningham's output raises numerous questions relating to categorisation, but for clarity I describe the works that are not music videos, in the traditional sense of sharing the name of the track and being dominated by it, as 'films'.
2. A comprehensive (although unofficial) list of Cunningham's completed and uncompleted projects can be found at <<http://kevinfholy.com/cunn/feature.html>>.
3. See <<http://pitchfork.com/features/staff-lists/7849-the-top-50-music-videos-of-the-1990s/5/>>.

4. The lyrics of the Aphex Twin track are clearly indebted to Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987), in which the Frank character repeats the phrase 'Come to Daddy', and the 'Pinhead' character utters the words 'We'll tear your soul apart'. The use of the phrase 'Come to Daddy' in other horror films (for example, it is uttered by Freddy Kreuger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988)) bolsters the sense that Cunningham/James are exploiting the shock/comedic potential of transplanting a cliché of fantasy cinema into the humdrum spaces of urban decay.

5. For a discussion of *Blue Jam* in this context, including the affiliations between the programme and Aphex Twin, see Dean and Hand (2013). It is also worth noting that the Warp label, so strongly connected to the work of Cunningham and Aphex Twin, released a CD of *Blue Jam* material in 2000, and the first work to be released through the offshoot Warp Films was Morris's *My Wrongs #8245–8249 & 117* (2003).

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