

Panel D1

Auditorium

Experimental Animation: Forms and Contexts

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One Dimensional Animation: MTV Animation and the “Quasi-Artistic Venture”



Experimental animation’s relationship with television in America is a longstanding one. It can be traced at least as far back as CBS’s adoption of modernist aesthetics for its motion graphics in the early 1950s.² MTV, which began broadcasting in 1981, set out to distinguish itself as a youth-orientated, anti-establishment music channel by integrating anti-authoritarian imagery into their animated logo and motion graphics design aesthetic. Its creative directors Fred Seibert and Alan Goodman wanted to use aesthetics and techniques that were being ignored by the mainstream. Thus they commissioned work from smaller graphic design collectives, independent animators, and advertising agencies (e.g., Manhattan Design (1979-1991), Colossal Pictures (1976-2000)) whose styles drew directly from alternative or experimental animation and graphic design cultures. This in turn disseminated those visual styles and techniques to a wide audience and led to a revival of interest in animation in the 1980s as a commercial and artistic practice aimed at an adult audience.

This paper will address the postmodern aesthetics of MTV in the 1980s—in particular in its use of experimental animation techniques (both in music videos and network IDs)—as a way of investigating the extended American practice of co-opting formal experimentalism into commercial television. Hence the title of this paper, which refers to Herbert Marcuse’s critique of consumer capitalism, in which he describes ‘one-dimensionality’ as the inability of critical thought or opposition to escape commodification in late capitalism. I propose to examine MTV’s postmodernist use of experimental and independent animation practices as an insight into the history of American experimental animation’s relation to commercialism more broadly, especially as it departs from its roots in the European historical avant-garde. I will conclude by exploring the ways in which MTV can be seen to have shaped contemporary conceptions of the spectrum of ‘developmental’/independent/experimental animation aesthetics.

Select Bibliography

Betancourt, Michael (2013) *The History of Motion Graphics: From Avant-garde to Industry in the United States*. Wildside Press.

Marcuse, Herbert (2002) *One Dimensional Man*. Routledge Classics.

Russett, Robert & Starr, Cecile (1988) *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*, 2nd edition. Da Capo.

¹ Russett & Starr, p. 24.

² Betancourt, p.124.

Biography

Dr. Lilly Husbands received her PhD in Film Studies from King's College London in 2014. Her research is broadly concerned with the legacy and evolution of experimental animation in contemporary moving image art and visual culture. Drawing on the interdisciplinary relationships between aesthetics, philosophy, critical theory, cultural studies, software studies, media semiotics and art history, her research investigates the increasingly complex socio-political and cultural context of contemporary multimedia practice. She has published numerous articles on experimental animation in journals such as *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)*, *Frames Cinema Journal*, and *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*.



She is an associate editor of *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. She is also the recipient of the 2014 McLaren-Lambart Award for the Best Scholarly Article in Animation published 2012-2013, for 'The Meta-physics of Data: Philosophical Science in Semiconductor's Animated Videos', published in *MIRAJ: Moving Image Review & Art Journal*. Her book chapter 'Fantastical Empathy: Encountering Abstraction in Bret Battey's *Sinus Aestum* (2009)' is forthcoming in Chris Holliday and Alexander Sergeant's *Fantasy/Animation: History, Theory, Culture*. She is currently co-authoring and co-editing (with Paul Taberham and Miriam Harris) a book entitled *Experimental Animation: From Analogue to Digital*, to which she will contribute a chapter on multimedia animation, performance, and curation in Peter Burr's *Special Effect* (2013-14).