

The London Consortium  
**Static.** Issue 05 - Metamorphosis

<http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue05/>

# Tim Horsburgh

## What is it like to be a Music Video? Metamorphosis in the work of Chris Cunningham

[http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue05/static5\\_horsburgh.php](http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue05/static5_horsburgh.php)

---

© Tim Horsburgh / Static / London Consortium / July 2007

---

Static is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate.

Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc. Static will welcome feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists, and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

<http://static.londonconsortium.com>

---

The London Consortium - <http://www.londonconsortium.com>  
Architectural Association - <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/>  
Birkbeck College (University of London) - <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/>  
Institute of Contemporary Arts - <http://www.ica.org.uk/>

'The only part of music videos I am into is translating sound into pictures. I hear a song and I can see what the sound looks like.'<sup>1</sup> - Chris Cunningham.

'The scandal that lies at the core of metamorphosis: the same spirit/soul/essence appears to occupy different forms and yet remain itself.'<sup>2</sup> - Marina Warner.

'In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far) it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat.'<sup>3</sup> - Thomas Nagel.

The mental 'scandal' behind physical metamorphoses occurs because we can imagine what it is like to be a different form from our own, but can never fully realize what it is like for that form to be itself. A complete metamorphosis of mind and body would leave no remainder of the previous self and therefore should generate no anxiety. A metamorphosis of form alone however, without mind, is discomfiting because the subjective character of our experience does not allow for us to *know* what it is like to *be* something else. Fictional accounts of metamorphoses into new bodies are often disturbing because of our own incomprehensibility of that organism's conscious experience. We can only attempt to describe what it is like to be another organism through its objective physical characteristics; even if we know everything there is to know about the internal neurological constitution of that organism, its phenomenological experience will still remain ineffable and unimaginable. This gap between subjective and objective experience is arguably irreconcilable, and yet artists by nature attempt to fill it by creating objects that are expressions of their subjective experience; the artist 'conceives' an idea, and gives birth to it in the form of a physical object. However, this process of embodying often alters the idea's essence, and it becomes further transformed by each person's experience of the object. Many analysts of audiovisual objects prefer to think of them as 'bodies', with their own 'automatism', and have 'imagined the growth of film's body through the acquisition of different senses and faculties.'<sup>4</sup> In positing cinema as 'life expressing life... experience expressing experience' and then asking 'what does cinema want?'<sup>5</sup>, these critics enter into Thomas Nagel's discussion of the 'problem of other minds'; while attempting to provide a satisfactory explanation for the subjective phenomenon of our experiences of audiovisual entities, they have implicitly asked "what is it like to be a film?" The problem for analysts of the mind/body problem, and for theoreticians of film-bodies, is of how to develop Nagel's thesis of an 'objective phenomenology' in order to describe things in 'a language that would allow us to understand the experience of other organisms without reference to imagination,'<sup>6</sup> or perhaps 'in favour of putting man and the world back together, or in sync.'<sup>7</sup>

1 Quoted in Relic, Peter, 'Chris Cunningham' RES magazine, Vol.1 #4. Fall 1998, taken from Holy, Kevin, Directors-file.com. Consulted 09/11/06. <[www.directors-file.com/Cunningham/588](http://www.directors-file.com/Cunningham/588)>.

2 Warner, Marina, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Seeing the Self* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), p. 118.

3 Nagel, Thomas, 'What is it like to be a bat?' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct, 1974), p.439.

4 Connor, Steven, 'Sounding Out Film', *Seeing to Sound: On Sound, Music and Voice*. Birkbeck College. 11/11/04. <[www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/soundingoutfilm](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/soundingoutfilm)>.

5 Connor, paraphrasing Vivian Sobchack, 'Sounding Out Film.'

6 Harrison, John, *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing*, (Oxford: University Press, 2001), p. 236-7.

7 Connor, 'Sounding Out Film.'

In music videos sounds remain themselves, and yet occupy a new body. While Chris Cunningham's videos portray many physical metamorphoses – and the music itself is often made by the technologically-aided transformation of original source sounds – further metamorphoses occur when both the forms combine, both in the audiovisual body and the audience's own perceptive organs. This has been identified by Michel Chion as 'synchresis': a spontaneous and simultaneous weld of auditory and visual phenomena that is particularly powerful when mixing images and sounds 'that strictly speaking have nothing to do with each other, forming monstrous yet inevitable and irresistible agglomerations in our perception.'<sup>8</sup> This is similar to Marina Warner's conception of how can skilful artists avoid the 'scandal' of metamorphosis through 'linking the disparate pieces' so that the audience does not see or hear 'the successive stages... as different, fully developed forms at all, but as aspects of the single creature.'<sup>9</sup> Both theories rely on aesthetic synthesis and synchronicity: the qualities most commonly associated with synaesthesia and most commonly praised in Chris Cunningham's work. He deploys a style that translates his subjective experiences into changeable forms, altering what the audience sees or hears not through layering images onto to sound but by fusing them together into a permanently inseparable yet fluctuating gestalt. Walter Murch states that the most successful audiovisual works achieve the sensation described by Chion and Warner by 'choosing exactly the right sound at the metaphoric distance from the image. It has something to do with the time it takes for the audience to "get" the metaphors: not instantaneously, but not much delayed either - like a good joke.'<sup>10</sup> In analysing the many metamorphoses that occur within and to the bodies of Chris Cunningham's music videos, it is indeed useful and enlightening to focus on the role of metaphors, synchronicity, and even the difference between what can make a good or a bad joke.

Chris Cunningham's claim to 'see' what a sound looks like is a common statement made by people who have the neurological condition Synaesthesia: 'implying the experience of two, or more, sensations occurring together.'<sup>11</sup> Scientists examining this condition have found that 'in almost all cases it is a visual sensation caused by auditory stimulation.'<sup>12</sup> While music videos metaphorically correspond to the synaesthetic process of adding visuals to sound, the development of moving pictures reversed this biological process, evolving from a deaf/mute infant into a body of unified sound and vision. Chion argues that the history of film can be 'told as an endless movement of integrating the most disparate elements: sound and image, the sensory and the verbal.'<sup>13</sup> He proposes that the 'audiovisual relationship is not natural, but a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, agreeing to think of sound and image as a single entity.'<sup>14</sup> Chion bases his placement of music video in audiovisual ontogenesis on a similar conception: as a form that repeatedly, but only briefly, achieves synchronisation; any synaesthesia is a fleeting product of the audience's imaginations rather than an objective condition of the film-body.<sup>15</sup> This might

---

8Chion, Michel, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 63.

9 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 118.

10 Murch, Walter, 'Foreword' to Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. xxii.

11 Harrison, *Synaesthesia*, p. 3.

12 *Ibid.*, p.3.

13 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 183. Chion's splitting of the verbal and the sensory is an important factor of his view of the negative dominance of the voice in audio-vision, which shall be discussed later.

14 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 215-6 (footnote 5).

15 Chion, p. 167.

explain why some critics of music video describe it as a 'schizophrenic'<sup>16</sup> genre in which the visuals only fleetingly cling to the sounds, and many 'purists' of cinema or music initially rejected its hybrid nature. However, Cunningham has admitted to laboriously crafting his videos to ensure the perfect melding of sounds and images, 'because people's brains are becoming more and more finely tuned to these things.'<sup>17</sup> According to the most recent neurological research, he may be correct; it may be possible that through regular repetition of a perceptual event 'we could train ourselves to have a kind of synaesthesia.'<sup>18</sup> Theoretically, the audience's perceptive organs could be lured into projecting a sense of synaesthesia onto the audiovisual object; repeated exposure to synchronised media through the sequential nature of music television, which plays many synched videos on rotation, could even cause a transformation in the audience's own sensory perception. Whether one has synaesthesia or not, neuroscience's standard view is that after each mental experience 'the brain has physically changed to accommodate this new fact,' and that repetition ensures a heightened receptivity to these transformations.<sup>19</sup> In this context, frequent exposure to a hybrid audiovisual being, rather than being disturbing, is both pleasurable and potentially addictive.

An awareness of the human mind's innate desire to believe in the 'unnatural' melding of sound and image into a single entity is what drives Cunningham's best work, as well as accounting for the many repetitions of visual leitmotifs in his career. Equally, it helps explain why the video for Madonna's *Frozen* was Cunningham's most personally disappointing major work. As an image-based pop star she demanded a concentration upon her voice and appearance, to the detriment of the work's complete audio-visual unity. Madonna's physical movements, particularly of her lips and hands (the traditional ways of expressing meaning in conversation) are often neither in sync with the music nor the shape-shifting visuals present in the rest of the video, rendering the 'syncretic metaphor' ineffective as the work becomes overloaded with ill-fitting symbolism. In Cunningham's other more synaesthetic works, this very centring of speech and gesture as the locale of 'meaning' is either absent, mocked, or modified in order to generate a more resonant audiovisual experience.<sup>20</sup>

A recent analysis of synaesthesia argued that 'there are early transitory pathway that carry auditory information to visual areas of the brain.... these pathways are preserved into adulthood in people with synaesthesia, whereas the

---

16 Reiss, Steve, and Feineman, Neil, *Thirty Frames Per Second: The Visionary Art of the Music Video* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 2000), p. 10.

17 Chris Cunningham, quoted in McGeoch, Callum, 'In Full Effect' in *Dazed and Confused*, #53, 04.99. <[www.director's-file.com/592](http://www.director's-file.com/592)>

18 Harrison, *Synaesthesia*, p. 246.

19 Harrison, *Synaesthesia*, p. 6-7.

20 Alongside the videos discussed in this essay, a special mention should be made here of Cunningham's short film *Rubber Johnny*, which is almost the antithesis of *Frozen*. The video portrays an imbecilic and physically-deformed 'star' who can only mumble nonsensically when his father attempts to communicate with him verbally, and yet appears to be uncontrollably compelled to 'dance' in perfect synch with the complex percussive soundtrack provided by Aphex Twin. The content is completely devoid of meaning or message, and yet hypnotic and fascinating due to Cunningham's commitment to syncretic audio-visual unity. Cunningham himself remarked: 'The primary objective with this video was to try and push the synchronisation aspects of my work to the limit... I wanted to see how fast you can go before it becomes nonsensical, a mess... It was incredibly difficult to edit this video and find that line where it seems breakneck, but still flows and makes sense as a sequence.' Quoted on Warp News, 'New Chris Cunningham Interview 05.08.05', Warp Records, Consulted 12/04/07, <[www.warprecords.com/?news=860](http://www.warprecords.com/?news=860)>.

rest of us lose the ability somewhere around three months of age when changes in the structure and connectivity of the brain allow us to differentiate between input from the different senses.<sup>21</sup> Music video's potential ability to bring us back to this state by triggering the illusory sensation of synaesthesia – by activating 'the ability to connect in consciousness the visual and audible phenomena... inherent to everyone'<sup>22</sup> – is what makes it exude 'vitality'<sup>23</sup> for Chion. He even posits the future of film as a lying in an audiovisual body of greater complexity that is also without divided senses: a 'polyphonic cinema.'<sup>24</sup> Although music video presents some characteristics of this future organism to him, he seems unconvinced of the genre's ability to deliver, citing that music videos 'are not intellectualised in their production process.'<sup>25</sup> An interesting parallel exists here between Cunningham's inability, or reluctance, to describe a 'meaning' behind his videos. Cunningham claims that he doesn't 'work on that kind of level,'<sup>26</sup> and that he is more stimulated by 'anatomy' and 'movement.'<sup>27</sup> This is enhanced by a fascination with the anatomy of the audio-visual form itself, of the film body's 'perceptive and expressive organs.'<sup>28</sup> Through the manipulation of these organs Cunningham generates audio-visual works that encourage acknowledgement of the act of experiencing as another form of union, this time between audience and object.

An early critic of the music video genre wrote: 'they are self-contained packages of sight and sound. All kids have to do is watch and listen and stare straight ahead. No need to think, to embellish, to imagine. The electric fix is in.'<sup>29</sup> Cunningham mocks commentary like this in the Aphex Twin video *Come to Daddy*, playing upon fears of metempsychosis and the corrupting influence of television. Exceeding the notion of experiencing media as a form of union and sensory transformation, in *Come to Daddy* television explicitly aims to steal the souls of children. In a parallel of Marina Warner's analysis of myths and fairy tales, our metamorphic fictions are also 'hatching' from the visual media that dominates the modern world around us: 'no longer an external vision of a natural, yet unreal place, but embodying the shifting character of knowledge, of theories of self, and of models of consciousness that postulate the brain as an endlessly generative producer of images and of thoughts.'<sup>30</sup> But if audiovisual media is a prosthesis, an extension of our 'affective and perceptual capacities,'<sup>31</sup> then it is possible that its desire to 'come to life'<sup>32</sup> could threaten our own identities. So while enamoured theorists imagine audio-visual entities as a 'sensory and cognitive prosthesis which, far from alienating or dehumanising the body whose capacities it extends, expresses and fulfils that body's nature,'<sup>33</sup> *Come to Daddy* depicts an unhealthy

---

21 Ibid., p. 19.

22 Bulat Guleyev, quoted in Harrison, *Synaesthesia*, p. 243.

23 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 163.

24 Ibid., p. 183.

25 Ibid., p. 167.

26 Cunningham, quoted in Benson, Richard, 'Wizard of Odd' in *Telegraph Magazine*: 09/09/00, p. 62.

27 Cunningham, quoted in Relic, 'Chris Cunningham,' RES.

28 Sobchack, quoted in Connor, 'Sounding Out Film.'

29 Saltzman, Joe, 'Predigested Dreams' *USA Today*, Jan 1984, quoted in Reiss and Feineman, *Thirty Frames Per Second*, p. 21.

30 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 202.

31 Connor, 'Sounding Out Film'.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., paraphrasing Sobchack.

psychological interaction with media that becomes physical; it sees us less as Freud's 'prosthetic gods' than as prosthetic mutants, playing on fears of cloning by positing Aphex Twin's music as an infectious and identity-consuming virus. What Adorno called 'whistling in the dark' – the opportunity to use music as a comforting addition to potentially disturbing visuals – is denied by an audiovisual unity that is itself a form of body horror. The 'richer'<sup>34</sup> perception of synaesthetes can also be a curse if the commixture of senses allows no escape.

In *Come to Daddy* visual distortions parallel not only the sound, but also the bizarre universe portrayed within the video's narrative; each rupture of the visual frame's stability through flickering, fuzzy lines and static is constantly synched with the trajectories and punctuations of the electronic music. The video reflexively plays on this sense of visual corruption, depicting a malignant force emerging from a television, and causing a further metamorphosis in those who view it. A twisting face on/in the television demands "I WANT YOUR SOUL" directly at the viewer; the auditory distortions of its voice synchronised with its visual contortions. Then, in a spiteful parody of a different generation's fears of television and technology, a figure 'hatches' from the television and screams violently into an old woman's face. The voice then demands "COME TO DADDY" and the children – now gross Aphex Twin doppelgangers – oblige, surrounding the figure in a circle of reverential worship at the video's culmination.

What is not clear from this description is that Cunningham intended this video, and his next Aphex Twin work *Windowlicker*, not to be dark and disturbing but 'comedies', based on 'playground humour.'<sup>35</sup> As Cunningham said: 'The dark thing is something that only other people pick up on; it's certainly not my idea of dark. I look at my work and don't think it's dark at all. The first Aphex Twin video I think, really, depending on if you know the Aphex Twin and you have heard his music, you are going to find it funny. It's lots of kids running around with his face on. But if you don't know who the Aphex Twin is... it's a bunch of fucking horrible looking kids.'<sup>36</sup> The apparently synaesthetic unity of the audiovisual body forces the viewer to reject or accept it as a whole; one cannot simply like the music only and not the accompanying visuals, or vice versa. Whether or not audiences 'get' the joke, or instead recoil in horror, depends upon the percipient's willingness to immerse themselves in the audiovisual world Cunningham creates: to allow his or her subjective self to be subsumed to the will of the music video body. To do this is in the knowledge that this act is itself a replication of the Aphex Twin-headed figures on the screen, who are themselves 'annulled: another works their will through them.'<sup>37</sup> This is exactly the zombification so feared by critics of music video. Those who reject the videos will still have their fear and incomprehension, but will be themselves; those who accept them have had their perceptions transformed and unified with the audio-visual object.

With his second video for Aphex Twin Cunningham again attempted to replicate the essence of music in his visuals, by trying 'to make the imagery as commercial as possible, but make the content totally bent. I think the track itself could be described like that.'<sup>38</sup> Released purely as a one-off single, *Windowlicker* was to be a completely audiovisual promotional tool from its inception, destined to always and only be experienced as a hybrid being. Cunningham's intention was to exaggerate and corrupt the misogyny and aesthetic uniformity of hip-hop and R'n'B videos in a 'cartoon' style; Aphex Twin's face is here transplanted onto the

34 Baron-Cohen, Simon, 'Foreword' to Harrison, Synaesthesia, p. viii.

35 Cunningham, quoted in Bidder, Nicky, 'Chris Cunningham', *Dazed and Confused* #70: 10/00. <[www.directors-file.com/cunninghamV606](http://www.directors-file.com/cunninghamV606)>.

36 Cunningham, quoted on 'Mirrorball', Channel 4. Aired 30.05.99. <[www.directors-file.com/cunningham/593](http://www.directors-file.com/cunningham/593)>.

37 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 124.

38 Cunningham, 'Windowlicker', *The Work of Chris Cunningham*, Palm Pictures/Directors Label, p. 29.

head of semi-clad women, dancing to his rhythms. Whereas *Come to Daddy's* children had already transformed into Aphex Twin prior to being revealed to the audience, in *Windowlicker* the audience witnesses two women simultaneously take on Aphex Twin's visage after watching him parody Gene Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain*, complete with umbrella. This is a physical metamorphosis explicitly based on sexual attraction, with a visual transfiguration that is clung to by the sounds of a female vocal gasp and musical key shift in an orgasmic 'synch-point'. The two women then join more Aphex Twin sex-zombies in the back of a limousine, subsequently dancing on a beach in a parody of Busby Berkeley's geometrically choreographed musicals, before they are all doused in champagne. The popping of a cork of course is a common visual metaphor for ejaculation, only here the image coincides with a harsh and prolonged electronic upsurge in Aphex Twin's music, rather than a source sound of a real champagne bottle being opened.

Cunningham said that when he first heard the track it made him 'think of girls' arses... and the first half sounded like driving round in the sun.'<sup>39</sup> However, it is tempting to interpret different meanings beyond his rather disingenuous response. If one adopts Marina Warner's idiom, for example, the video could reverse the 'threat to personhood [that] comes from bodily manipulation and psychological multiplicity, the monstrous threat of the many-in-the-one.'<sup>40</sup> Aphex Twin's dancing sexual object again spreads like a virus, contaminating the women and making them grotesque: the one-into-the-many. Without their own faces – the visual home of physical identity – they become mere malleable forms, corporeal cartoons that can be manipulated into dancing for the 'playground' amusement of 'daddy' Aphex and weird uncle Chris.

However, to submit such a reading ignores the humour of both the music and the visuals; unfortunately, when faced with this provocative audiovisual mutant, some critics did just that. While Cunningham was happy to admit to its blatant and exaggerated treatment of women as sexual objects (merely stating that the 'unbent' and entrenched sexism of the R'n'B video genre was far more shocking), he was surprised by some viewers' interpretation of the video as being 'racist'. One popular UK R'n'B television presenter's response was, 'What you'd expect in a video like this is maybe 20 seconds of explicit dialogue – but it went on for so long that you got the feeling that this guy was trying to make a statement. What's the agenda here?'<sup>41</sup> However, *Windowlicker* presents no socio-political 'agenda', and instead reflects and expands upon a recurrent theme of Cunningham's oeuvre: the limiting dominance of speech in conventional audiovisual bodies.

In the prologue two men argue in their car over the most effective way to verbally seduce women, before pulling up to the curb upon sighting a pair: 'an effort at chatting up the girls follows, which translates in the code of the street as a stream of swearing and abuse.'<sup>42</sup> The pitiful and prolonged sequence exposes the self-defeating lack of coherence and futility of the men's speech at deliberately irritating length, until Aphex Twin's limousine crashes into the back of their car in a ridiculous cartoon fashion. As Aphex Twin's grinning countenance is revealed inside the limo, soothing and intoxicating music replaces the harsh speech, and is subsequently in synch with the visuals dominated by that face for the video's remainder.

Cunningham's video for Squarepusher's *Come on My Selector* also mocks the dominance of speech, and how audiences are dependent on language and text in guiding how images should be interpreted. However, while Michel Chion saw the very 'vitality' of music videos as lying in their potential for 'liberation from the linearity normally imposed by sound' because 'none of the narration is propelled

39 Cunningham, 'Windowlicker', *The Work Of Chris Cunningham*, p. 29.

40 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 162.

41 Trevor Nelson, quoted in O'Reilly, John, 'Face the Music', *The Guardian*, 05.03.99. Features, p. 16.

42 Ibid.

by dialogue,<sup>43</sup> in *Come on my Selector* dialogue and speech are 'relativised'<sup>44</sup> in a variety of complex and polyphonically perverse ways. This not only propels Cunningham's 'live-action cartoon'<sup>45</sup> narrative, but also continuously aims to make the audience aware of the metamorphic nature of both aspects of audio-vision.

Chion only briefly considers a key way in which films and video undergo a forced mutation from their original nature: the foreign language translation. In these films, especially when considering the action genre, a focus on oral delivery of the 'message', of speech as the locale of identity and meaning, is often absent due to either dubbing or subtitles, which unbalance the audience's attention in favour of either the ear (dubbing) or the eye (subtitles). Dubbing is almost never satisfying because the sound often feels so 'out of sync' with the visuals, while subtitles relegate vocal intonation and facial expressiveness in favour of the ever dependable world of text. Cunningham's prologue for Squarepusher's *Come on my Selector* abuses both of these devices to create an atmosphere of disorientation that undermines the audience's reliance on referencing sounds and voices to their spatial or subjective visual sources. Rather than providing the solution 'to the perpetual problem of integrating the real with the verbal'<sup>46</sup> the prologue intentionally exasperates it in order to amplify the power of the climactic audiovisual 'synch-point': the metamorphosis.

In the 'Osaka Home for Mentally Disturbed Children', a psychotic little girl and her dog outwit and attack their supervisors, culminating in an exchange of bodies between canine and guard. The video begins with Japanese text and its English translation below revealing the setting. As a guard walks down a dark corridor, the sound of whistling can be faintly recognised amidst a low dissonant rumbling. The guard checks on a child through his bedroom door and mouths "go to sleep" in English, but the sound the viewer hears is Japanese, with subtitles translating the sounds back into English text. The first time it is easy to miss, but the guard moves onto a second door and we see his lips repeat "go to sleep" in the slow and deliberate intonation of a tourist trying to make himself understood to a native, but this time there is no speech heard on the soundtrack. The guard is still mouthing "go to bed" even as subtitles read "quiet night, huh?" and "little lost causes" while the audience hears two different voices conversing. Not looking, the guard assumes he is talking to a colleague, but the camera reveals the head of the dog inside an overcoat. The audience hears the dog replying in Japanese while reading "completely lost" in the subtitles, presumably mimicking their own bewilderment at this supposed 'music' video. The next scene is even more disorientating: the fake 'body' (the girl and her dog disguised in the overcoat) is dismantled, and the audience hears the girl's thoughts to her dog in Japanese, sees their meaning through English subtitles, but never once do her lips move; speech becomes bodiless. The guard moves on, checking the girl's room only to discover she has deceived him. In this moment of revelation the audience sees a doll's head and teddy bear drop to the floor, but hears mangled children's laughter layered over electronic fizzles and resonant clanging: the first 'synch-point' in the video, and a cue for its transformation into synchronicity as the music begins.

The highly structured violence and slapstick prevalent in cartoons and the martial arts genre defines the ensuing musical section of the video. Merging the editing rhythms with the music in a form of reverse 'mickeymousing', Cunningham presents images of guards running up and down stairs and kung fu fighting with the audiovisual synchrony of Manga cartoons. The visuals follow the 'spontaneous sound productions'<sup>47</sup> of children at play, conveying the movement and trajectory of Squarepusher's music. However, at the metamorphic and ontological climax of the video the finely synchronised music and manic

---

43 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 167.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

45 Cunningham, 'Come on my Selector', *The Work of Chris Cunningham*, p. 25.

46 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 184.

47 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 121.

accelerated visuals briefly halt, and the soul of the faithful dog - now the established occupier of the guard's body - speaks his first words in English: "I'M THE FUCKING DADDY!" as they are translated along the bottom of the screen in large Japanese capitals. What the English-language viewer hears finally matches with the movement of the characters' lips, and yet this seems the most unnatural aspect of the entire video; the audience sees movement that synchs with what is heard, but simultaneously reads something that makes no sense. The simple spatial switch of text and sound is both logical as it corresponds with the video's theme of metamorphic transference of minds and bodies, yet simultaneously illogical in terms of audience conventions of translated speech on screen. This reinforces the power and surprise of the English language profanity that is the promotional video's only 'message' (if one is required): Squarepusher is 'the daddy' and you should consider buying his music. The video aims to disturb the viewer's mental conceptions one last time by the joke presented in its final shot: an un-translated Japanese subtitle that shares half the screen with the dog, who stares back at them quizzically. Cinematic conventions dictate that the text says 'The End', but the dog, director and artist aren't interested in confirming it one way or another.

For Michel Chion 'the real and the corporeal'<sup>48</sup> are anything that takes power away from articulation. He advocates creating audiovisual bodies that 'give us the feeling that the world is not reduced to the function of embodying dialogue.'<sup>49</sup> The key phrase here is 'give us the feeling'; Chion yearns for films that reposition speech as just another element of the audiovisual world, and in so doing, make the act of experiencing it feel more like the polyphonic and polysensory world around us. The hope for champions of this 'new' audio-vision lies not in a 'primitive, archaic or infantile'<sup>50</sup> formlessness, or disembodiment, but in 'reincorporating values that speech had led the cinema to throw onto the scrap heap.'<sup>51</sup> The remarkable paradox of this idea is its cyclical nature; that the use of sound as 'a primary, but evanescent materiality' may be able to preserve some of the lost 'polymorphous signifying capacities of the silent cinema.'<sup>52</sup> In returning to an enhanced form of the cinema body's infantilism, viewers may 'feel' more than the two senses of sight and sound allow, but only if the eyes' focus on the speaking mouth is overthrown.

The video that Cunningham claims to be the closest reflection of his personality also achieves the most remarkable and memorable transformation of a song's meaning of any his oeuvre, and yet does not portray any physical metamorphoses at all. His video for Portishead's *Only You* succeeds in conveying what Walter Murch deemed the pinnacle of audio-vision 'and triggers a kind of conceptual resonance between image and sound: the sound makes us see the image differently, which in turn makes us see something else in the image, which makes us hear different things in the sound, and so on.'<sup>53</sup> There is nothing innate in the music or the images that suggest the two belong together, but through commixture they do not merely alter what the audience perceives, but also establish a state of constant and cyclical metamorphosis back and forth between sound and image, making it impossible to conceivably separate them afterwards as distinct sensory parts. Once the video is seen, *Only You* is forever sung underwater.

Hearing *Only You* reminded Cunningham of a recurring childhood dream of 'walking down the high street of the village I grew up in and not being able to catch my breath. It was like standing on the sea-bed with lead boots on and

---

48 Ibid., p. 122.

49 Ibid., p. 183.

50 Connor, 'Sounding Out Film.'

51 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 183.

52 Connor, 'Sounding Out Film.'

53 Murch, 'Foreword' to Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision*, p. xxii.

looking and looking up and seeing the surface of the water forty feet away and feeling really panicked and wanting to get to the top.<sup>54</sup> The simple video is a uniquely disorientating sensory experience that through a combination of audiovisuals creates 'a slow motion, night time dreamscape' with its 'own perverse logic... to capture the feeling of foreboding in the song.'<sup>55</sup> The vocals, rarely sung directly to camera, convey the sense of drifting uncontrollably out of singer Beth Gibbons' mouth and immediately transforming into merely another element of the audio-visual space. The shot of a mysterious man watching through a window above the alley heightens the sense of paranoia in the music, which the audience feels directly. Cunningham created a new and yet strangely familiar audiovisual world by filming underwater for its particular effects upon the body and movement, but then subsequently removing all references to the physical 'body' of the water (such as bubbles of air) in post-production. The resultant effect is that there seems to be no visible edges to the shots, making the images more like sounds in the way in which they intermingle uncertainly. The intention is to make the viewer 'feel' as lost as the scene's inhabitants, experiencing a sensory formlessness of remarkable complexity and yet simultaneously acute physical consciousness. Everything is in constant metamorphosis, adapting to and being transformed by its environment, and painfully unsure of its self and its relation to the objective world. The only comparable atmosphere transcends that of childhood fear, and almost invokes a sense akin to inhabiting the womb. With his most simple yet absolute depiction of metamorphosis, Cunningham completes the audiovisual cycle, briefly returning the percipient to the polymorphous sensory experience of infantile synaesthesia, and possibly coming closer than any other work of art to embodying the 'hopeless'<sup>56</sup> consciousness that makes the mind/body problem so intractable.

Some theoreticians of audio-vision have posited that the future of the medium lies less in bringing the 'human body to life' through the melding of sights and sounds than in bringing 'to life the body of the world.'<sup>57</sup> Therefore the starting question for audiences must no longer be to ask 'what is it like to be a music video?' but instead, 'what is it like to be the world?' Nagel argued that one could only begin contemplate 'the problem of other minds' if nothing at all is left out; as soon as something is removed for the purpose of argument, 'the problem will be falsely posed.'<sup>58</sup> The endings to most of Cunningham's videos consist simply of lights and noise overlapping and intermingling, drifting together and apart like particles. These abstract conceptions are not only audio-vision when stripped to its most basic structural levels of expression, but the structural components of existence; this is life with nothing left out, as experienced by a purely audio-visual body. Future developments in media technology may perhaps one day allow audiences to further alter consciousness by relaying other senses through prosthetic objects, but for now this may be as close as one can get.

Chris Cunningham's music video oeuvre represents metamorphosis in a way that is simultaneously faithful to both the ancient depictions of Ovid and Lucretius, and also to the most pioneering modern scientific notions of existence: as a constantly changing flow of life, of things briefly coming together in time, welding into a gestalt, and then transmuting endlessly into further things. In audiovisual terms, appreciation of this conscious formlessness represents a metamorphosis of the senses in which they lose their disparate identities and form a superior being in unity with the world, engendering an experience beyond sight and sound. Cunningham's videos are not always strictly synaesthetic, but have something of the condition's ineffable qualities; those who do not incorporate

54 Cunningham, 'Only You', *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*, p. 18.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

56 Nagel, 'What is it like to be a Bat?', p. 439.

57 Connor, 'Sounding Out Film'.

58 Nagel, 'What is it like to be a Bat?', p. 440.

themselves into his world will never be able to understand it. However, what makes Chris Cunningham's work so resonant is the visceral sense that one is being brought as close as is possible to being 'in sync' with the audio-visual body, and is able to do so without needing to seek recourse in imagination or meaning; the metamorphosis is felt, not thought. If and when viewers do fully give themselves over to these bodies, entering into a metamorphic union with them, it is possible to believe that the subjective can briefly exist in audiovisual synch with the objective, and for the audience to be synched with a body and mind that are not their own.