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John Richardson, *An Eye for Music: Popular Music and the Audio-Visual Surreal*

Oxford: OUP, 2012

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Review by Alexis Bennett

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John Richardson's study of surrealism, or neo-surrealism, in pop, film and related media is an addition to the literature that brings into focus the serious discussion of the phenomenological effect of the collision of popular music and the visually implausible, disjointed or illogical. The process of contextualizing and challenging these “meaningful transactions [that] can often be located on the edges of discourse” (p.16), as Richardson does here, often reads like an exercise in stating the obvious, for surrealism informs and infuses so much popular music, films, music videos and web-based pop discourse that it seems hidden in plain sight. But this is an important book for the same reason: it is a thorough discussion of how surrealism both as a formal movement and as a series of related artistic strands has filtered into popular aesthetic discourse via a number of clearly illuminated avenues.

The author's term of choice, 'neo-surrealism', is carefully explained, being aligned with what has been similarly called the 'neo-avant-garde'. Central to his discussion is the role of the surreal in relation to the concept of shock: the capacity to shock, integral to early avant-garde movements like Dada and surrealism, has been superseded in film and pop in recent years by the intention to “make audiences wonder” (p.57). Moreover, the elements of humour and (crucially) the oneiric as surrealist modes are key to his argument, and it is largely through these channels that Richardson manages to construct a compelling account of how neo-surrealism runs through contemporary pop and film. Indeed, the early chapters, impressively supported with his vast and broad reading in several directions, take as their basic starting point that “the entire audio-visual field is undergoing a geological shift in a surreal direction.” (p.22)

The book is constructed around a series of case studies, including KT Tunstall, Suzanne Vega and Sigur Rós, and notably a penetrating look at the work of the cartoon band Gorillaz which considers the implications of that group's utilization of virtual reality to attempt a critique of pop culture whilst simultaneously benefitting from the media circus that they are trying to deconstruct. He asks pertinent questions about the role of the listener/consumer/audio-viewer/fan in such a project, and gives detailed analyses of key songs. The latter discussions, focusing on the minutiae of the music and production of the records, are less convincing than Richardson's broader interrogation of Gorillaz' rather paradoxical brand and image (“experimenting in the mainstream”, as Damon Albarn puts it, p.206). Richardson reminds those of us who might have thought of Gorillaz as something particularly unique that self-consciously constructed bands like this are, like many of their peers (Daft Punk among them) simply choosing to hide behind a facade in the

same way that the Beatles (*Yellow Submarine*), Kraftwerk and others had before them.

The study of Gorillaz and the fascinating following chapter, 'Performing Acoustic Music in the Digital Age', which examines the idea of 'acousticness' in an environment "where technological mediation is ubiquitous" (p.240), seem to expose a drawback of the book. Despite the author's frequent assertions that music videos are absolutely central to the development of the surreal in both pop and film, he doesn't give an extended case study of this medium in its basic format. In an apparent attempt to prepare for the questioning of this lack by readers and reviewers, he gives a series of explanations; ultimately he seems to be admitting that the study should have given more attention to the music video. The most convincing argument is that "this book is about *what music video aesthetics led to*" (p.7) (his emphasis). This comes just after declaring that "everything happening in audiovisual culture today is somehow related to music video aesthetics" (p.7), a statement that might justify at least a case study chapter (he urges us to read his other work on the subject).

Analyses of films by Michel Gondry and Sally Potter provide a platform for a finely tuned examination of how surrealism runs through narrative film, although actually they often read more like excellent, highly literary and illuminating studies of film rather than audio-visual criticism. His work on Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind* occasionally loses track of its musical mandate, despite being powerfully insightful about the filmic surreal that the movie embodies. However, I have rarely read a theorist who can put the effect of certain kinds of film music into words like Richardson does (he writes that some recent trends in film scoring have a habit of "employing classical scoring means but invested with a kinetic pulse that hijacks narrative agency away from the actors, turning them into passengers on a runaway train." (p.62)). Furthermore, in delving deep into the history of surrealism's closeness to *realism*, and in broadening his thesis to embrace dream discourses and camp aesthetics, he guides us into an understanding of some of the material that might otherwise have remained closed to interpretation.

Richardson's book works first and foremost as an exercise in mapping the complex network of theoretical reference points for understanding neo-surrealist tendencies in audio-visual popular culture. Indeed, his chapter "Navigating the Surreal: Background and Premises", despite being challenging in terms of its denseness at times, sets the book up with a satisfying survey of theorists whose work informs the studies that follow. His deployment of a vast range of thinkers throughout the book binds his case studies together and results in a work that contributes valuably to the field whilst serving as an informative and thorough introduction to surrealist aesthetics for those readers more accustomed to musicological material.