

It's a Bird: Animation, objective humour and the heart of the black star

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Abstract (long)

André Breton's sole published comment about animated film concerns the comedy *It's a Bird* (1930), featuring a bird that eats metal and hatches a car. Behind it lay the neglected animation genius Charley Bowers, whose work combined live action and stop motion in a series of anarchic and innovative works rediscovered in part by research close to surrealist circles. Seen by Breton towards the end of a decade characterised by the theme of surrealist objects, the animated materiality of *It's a Bird* also speaks to the emerging theme of humour culminating in the concept of *humour noir* – an idea previously couched in the Hegelian-inspired idea of 'objective humour'. This chapter aims to introduce Bowers as a missing member of the surrealist cinematic pantheon, explore the animation of *It's a Bird*, and consider its relationship to the critical perspectives of 1930s surrealism around objects and humour, making it a prize example of surrealist formulations of these concepts.

Abstract (short)

André Breton's sole comment on animated film concerns *It's a Bird* (1930). Featuring a metal-eating bird, it is the work of Charley Bowers, whose anarchic, innovative films combining live action and stop motion were rediscovered by research close to surrealist circles. This chapter introduces Bowers as a missing member of the surrealist cinematic pantheon, explores the animation of *It's a Bird*, and considers its relationship to the critical perspectives of 1930s surrealism around objects and humour.

Keywords

animation, surrealism, object, humour, Charley Bowers

Bio

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[Insert Figure 1 here]

It appears that André Breton, for whom the encounter between surrealism and cinema represented a complex but passionate relationship, only devoted a single sentence of his writings to the question of animated film. But this sole reference, in issue 10 of *Minotaure*, to the obscure stop motion comedy *It's a Bird* (1930; 14 minutes; USA), could hardly be more laudatory. Surveying the collision between film and humour in an untitled note – effectively an extended caption beneath a generous double still from the film – that would later form a paragraph of the preface to his *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940), Breton gives a roll call of comedy prodigies – Mack Senett, Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers – and connects them to the films of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Then comes this fleeting but powerful claim, omitted from the *Anthology*: ‘But in 1937 it is thanks to *It's a Bird* that we are projected for the first time, our eyes opened wide onto the blandly sensory distinction between the real and the fabulous, into the very heart of the black star.’¹ Subsequently acknowledged in passing references by surrealists as a classic, a deeper awareness of *It's a Bird* and the remarkable work of its maker would not emerge for another three decades, thanks again to research close to and within surrealist circles.

Minotaure credits *It's a Bird* to its director, Harold Muller (1893-1955), but at its heart is actor and animator Charles (‘Charley’) Bowers (1889-1946), the genius behind a string of forgotten miniature masterpieces. Bowers’ filmography features plentiful live-action slapstick comedy in the great American silent short tradition, but it is for combining live action and stop motion – the ‘Bowers Process’ – that he deserves recognition, putting him in the company of animation innovators such as Willis O’Brien. Released in 1930, *It's a Bird* is a typically raucous and technically brilliant example of Bowers’s work.² It spins the yarn of enterprising rascal Charley Chucklehead, who finds a legendary metal-eating bird, a genial (and English-speaking: this is among the earliest animated talkies) creature that consumes all kinds of items before laying an egg that hatches into a car. Bowers’s animations, as we shall see, stage explosions of absurd humour and extraordinary morphologies within everyday situations that make their appeal to surrealists easy to grasp. This chapter aims to introduce this missing member

of the surrealist cinematic pantheon, explore the animation of *It's a Bird*, and see how its relationship to the critical perspectives of 1930s surrealism around objects and humour make it such a prize for surrealist formulations of these concepts.

Breton's brief but prominent note encouraged other surrealists to acknowledge *It's a Bird's* credentials, but often in ways that betrayed their scant knowledge of it. While a chronology in the *Almanach Surréaliste du demi-siècle* (1950) cites the film erroneously as a key work from 1937, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma's* author Ado Kyrou claims it 'among the pinnacles of surrealist film' but apologises for never having seen it.³ Breton presumably saw *It's a Bird* as a short before a main feature, and one gets the sense that it was a revelation ('projected for the first time, our eyes opened wide'). Other evidence shows contemporary surrealists already knew of Bowers. There's an account of watching one of his best films *Now You Tell One* (1926; 22 minutes; USA) in New York in 1927 in the autobiography of Marcel Duhamel, resident of the celebrated surrealist enclave at 54, rue du Château with Yves Tanguy and the Prévert brothers; but Duhamel was also involved in dubbing *It's a Bird* into French – a film of 'pure poetry', in his estimation.⁴ Meanwhile, Spanish poet Rafaël Alberti, friend of Federico García Lorca, Dalí and Buñuel, published his poem 'Charles Bowers, Inventor' in 1929: 'Mechanics / Love / Poetry / Oh!'.⁵

The first informed perspective on the film within a surrealist forum would not come until 1989, in the Chicago group's journal *Arsenal* – a natural habitat for this acknowledgment given the group's unparalleled knowledge of surrealist eruptions in North American popular culture. Hal Rammel's short article 'Stop Motion Marvellous' pays homage to the film and companion instances of these 'exemplary tales of marvelous poetic humour', giving equal authorship to Bowers and Muller.⁶ But the most significant endeavour to resurrect the work – this time with sole credit to Charley Bowers and involving painstaking recovery of his films, most of which had disappeared – was sparked by the research by author and filmmaker Raymond Borde from the late 1960s onwards, helping locate a significant proportion of Bowers's output that Borde and others promoted through writings and screenings.⁷ Though the first outcome of this investigation, an article in the film journal *Midi/Minuit Fantastique*, appeared not long before Borde parted company with the Surrealist Movement, he had been a participant – albeit largely at a distance – in surrealist activities since the 1950s, and his future work as a film critic and promoter continued to be informed by surrealist perspectives.⁸ Further discoveries, notably by Serge Bromberg, continued from the 1970s onwards; by the early 2000s, their legacy allowed the current accessibility of Bowers' work through

DVD anthologies, some scholarly writing and informed online discussion.⁹ Though he remains an obscure figure, rarely discussed in the literature, it is at least possible to acknowledge Bowers' status as a pioneer and neglected master of animation.

Charley Bowers: Bricolo

If there is still some debate about the authorship of *It's a Bird* and other comedies made by its studio during the 1920s, it seems clear that while Muller (about whom little is known) was assigned as director, the responsibility for their animation techniques – the 'Bowers process' explicitly credited for the films – was Bowers's, not to mention that he often worked as their scriptwriter, cameraman and producer as well as lead actor.¹⁰ This list suggests a surprising diversity of talents, but the man himself appears no less extravagant: Bromberg describes him admiringly as 'wily, a braggart, a prankster and weirdo, a fantasist at the borders of mythomania.'¹¹ Born in 1889 in Iowa, according to Bowers himself – a source most commentators treat with understandable scepticism – the son of an Irish doctor and a French countess, kindergarten was his sole education: taught to walk the tightrope by a tramp at the age of 5, he was abducted by a circus for two years aged 6. Accounts of his early years have him as an elevator attendant, shop salesman, jockey, clown, vaudeville performer, set designer . . . and eventually cartoonist.¹²

Whatever the truth, by 1916 he had joined an animation studio producing hundreds of short, generally unsophisticated *Mutt and Jeff* cartoons.¹³ When this venture foundered, he set up his own studio in 1920, and developed his skills in stop motion animation – the Bowers process – whose most innovative and distinctive feature would be a seamless integration of live action and animation for the 'Whirlwind Comedies' shorts produced between 1926 and 1930 – sixteen in all, of which seven are lost and some only partially extant.¹⁴ This gives them a unique character, in which the line between (more or less) believable dramatic action within comedy narratives featuring human performers, and a fabulous domain of animated creatures, materials and objects (for the most part items that might plausibly also belong to the first realm but are normally considered bereft of sentient life) is constantly crossed, back and forth. All of this is presented in the framework of a familiar silent slapstick genre tinged with elements from Bowers' vaudeville and circus background. Many of the gags are anarchic, straining logic and veering from the silly to the sublime. In concert with the animated elements, at their best this lends the films a dreamlike quality, untethered from

conventional reality, and closer to the madcap world of cartoon animation than to contemporary puppet animation or film comedy.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In the Whirlwind Comedies, animation typically appears on the scene sporadically and late in the day, but its arrival signals a change in gear, a twist in the plot. Often marshalled around ingenious and extravagant inventions, it enacts radical solutions to everyday problems. In *He Done His Best* (1926; 23 minutes; USA), a series of hapless antics leads to the destruction of a restaurant and the loss of its staff, but Bowers's character has a plan: an immense food preparation and serving machine (Fig. 2). Ungainly pipes above the diners' heads deliver tablecloths and dinner services laid neatly in place. Food is prepared by mechanised hands and gadgets: for soup, an oyster obligingly crawls out of its shell and into a bowl of water; a hammer smashes potatoes to mash, and for the finishing touch a pea planted in a flowerpot flourishes into a plant that sprouts a tin of peas. *Egged On* from the same year (24 minutes; USA) features another crackpot invention, a barn-sized contraption to produce unbreakable eggs. When Bowers's character steals eggs from another farm and brings them back under the bonnet of a car, the result is a vivid, strangely touching sequence. Incubated on the Model T Ford's engine, the eggs hatch not into chicks but miniature Model T's, unfolding and then racing in their dozens across the floor past the astonished Charley, before scurrying back under their mother who obligingly folds her wheels and snuggles down to protect them.

The list of wonderful springings to life in the films is long: shellfish scuttle across the floor, living shoelaces thread their way into boots, cats grow on trees; a painted seascape pours rain into a bedroom; a toy monkey grows a beard . . . Admittedly, there is also a tendency to recycle ideas, some of which crop up repeatedly. This is particularly the case for Bowers' animation-only films of the 1930s; his work did not adapt well to the advent of sound, and these later examples feel less spontaneous and independent, despite their technical prowess. Severe illness, leading to Bowers's death in 1946, and the fact that the majority of his films had been silent shorts, meant that his early popularity was soon forgotten, not helped by the fact that animation would not receive the same scholarly attention as mainstream film for several decades.

It is significant that Bowers's eventual rediscovery happened in France, where his films had been widely distributed and appreciated, not only in conventional cinema programmes but also by travelling carnivals and entertainers.¹⁵ Here, his character was known as 'Bricolo' – in homage to his inventor's prowess, a diminutive of *bricoleur*: someone who creates and mends things using available resources. It would be years before Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his study of structures of knowledge and thought *La Pensée sauvage* (1962), identified *bricolage* as the principle of mythopoetic thinking in indigenous cultures, gathering and adapting whatever elements lie at hand (in contrast to the engineer's reliance on specialist technical skills and tools in industrial societies). In many ways, however, Bowers's French nickname anticipates Lévi-Strauss' proposal admirably. As Rob King observes in a study of Bowers' films as exemplary of slapstick's antimodernity, Bricolo's obsession with extraordinary inventions, shared with contemporaries such as Buster Keaton, owes less to modernising visions of progress than to an earlier tradition of 'showmen and hucksters' where novelty, imagination, spectacle and hokum come together in 'vestiges of magical thinking', while the natural environment of Bricolo's experiments is not the factory or laboratory but the barn.¹⁶ As King argues persuasively, the trick processes of early cinema, especially early stop-motion animation, are themselves part of this nexus of adaptive innovation sparking between invention and magic, subject to the same aura of secrecy and inside knowledge pertaining to *bricoleurs*, magicians and showmen.¹⁷

Bowers's connections to strands of magic, spectacle and *bricolage* also have one clear precedent from the perspective of surrealism's engagement with cinema history: the work of Georges Méliès. Often mythologised as one half of a foundational dichotomy within cinematic practice – where the Lumière brothers' invention of film spawned realism and documentary, the work of Méliès opens onto fiction and the fantastic – during the post-war era in particular surrealists would claim Méliès as the first to initiate cinema as the proper domain of the marvellous.¹⁸ Author of over 500 films (the majority now lost) between 1896 and 1912, in an era when an international industry was challenging the artisanal modes of early cinema to which his works belong, Méliès had multiple roles as director, writer, producer, designer and often lead actor, just like Bowers two decades later. As with Bricolo's miniature treasures, Méliès's films, all very short by today's standards, were as likely to be encountered in fairgrounds as in cinema theatres. For this reason as well as the failure of his Star Films studio in the face of aggressive business practices, by the First World War cosmopolitan audiences,

including first generation surrealists, would have been forgiven for missing the brief moment when the works were in circulation.¹⁹

Significantly, just like Bowers, and a central motive for surrealist enthusiasm for his works, Méliès's career was notable for its origins and engagement in popular entertainment, theatrical phantasmagoria, stage magic and automata.²⁰ Made in a custom-built studio complex just outside Paris, the majority of Méliès's films were fictional dramas, in which themes such as fairy tales, incredible journeys in the tradition of Jules Verne like the celebrated *Voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*; 1902; 18 minutes; France), and demonstrations of illusions and magic feats took centre stage. Like Bowers yet again, extraordinary mechanisms and imaginary technologies are juxtaposed with a certain cynicism about modernity, as for instance in *Le Raid Paris–Monte-Carlo en automobile* (*An Adventurous Automobile Trip*; 1905; 12 minutes; France), portraying the car as an instrument of mayhem. Nearly all the works are essentially comedies, though this categorisation covers not only pratfalls, mishaps and staged explosions but also outbursts of anarchy and the absurd. Kyrou notes the 'absolute freedom' of Méliès's scripts, the destructive poetry of an 'avalanche of gratuitous acts' in his stories: his work is revolutionary 'because his frantic fantasies went against the habits established by society'.²¹ Claimed by Kyrou as the first instalment of a surrealist history of cinema exemplifying emanations of the marvellous in film, Méliès is the founding master of a realm in which film, rather than reflecting the world as it appears, assumes its autonomous potential to construct and reveal a hidden kingdom of its own.

Crucially in our context here, what Méliès particularly bestowed upon film – origins soon forgotten and claimed by others – was a panoply of cinematographic 'tricks': in Jacques Brunius's list, 'fading, dissolving, masking, superimpositions, slow motion, quick motion, parallel action, close-ups',²² deployed not as formal experiments but as a means to draw in audiences and make the incredible credible. Above all, Méliès is credited with inventing the very principle of stop motion – or rather, in classic surrealist mode, falling upon it by chance, when a jammed camera mechanism produced an accidental jump cut and turned one moving object into another, a technique his films would exploit extensively.²³ It is for this reason that, even if Méliès makes only occasional use of animation in the narrow sense of the term, and does so as just one tool in a whole box of them, he could be seen as the grandfather of animation, in which every decor, object and actor is set in motion, as the raw material of an animate world in which everything is liable to be transported into new forms and meanings.²⁴

It's a Bird: animation versus modernity

But what of *It's a Bird*, and how might we view it to understand Breton's exceptional enthusiasm? Drawing upon several recurring themes from Bowers's 1920s comedies, as though to rephrase them for fresh audiences now that this was a talkie, in fact this would be his last film using the Bowers process (later works being pure animation). Like many of his previous films, the first half is live action, presented as a narrative within a narrative. Opening credits proclaim 'Charley Bowers in a Lowell Thomas Tall Story: *It's a Bird*', and an announcer introduces the host of a broadcast of 'Great American whoppers': Thomas, a real-life broadcaster, adventurer and travel writer who specialised in far-fetched comedy narratives and indeed would edit a book of *Tall Stories* in 1931.²⁵ Thomas invites Charley Chucklehead of Chattanooga (played by Bowers) to tell his story. Working in a breaker's yard, Charley's task is to dispose of scrap metal, which we see him do to comic effect, always at the expense of ruling class or authority figures: replacing antiques from a removal van with old fenders and boilers, attaching unwanted wheels to a fancy automobile, or assembling car components around a cop dozing on a park bench. At the Natural History Museum, Professor Diterhoffer tells him of a legendary metal-eating bird; Charley launches a ramshackle expedition to find it. This segment features two concerning moments: a poster in Diterhoffer's office with plainly racist caricatures of 'natives' feeding tin cans to the metal-eating bird, and the map of the expedition that eventually tracks it to the Belgian Congo (scene of some of the most iniquitous colonial repressions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Did Breton, a vigorous anticolonial activist, miss these very brief moments, or choose to overlook them?²⁶

If the film has been entertaining enough so far, now it shifts gear as live action is infiltrated by animation, in a series of sequences in the vanguard of contemporary techniques.²⁷ Charley captures the metal-eating bird, resembling a plucked chicken in boots, tufted tail, ruff and top-knot, bicycles back to New York and puts her in a shed to devour scrap metal. We have already seen her eat a whole trombone; now she consumes the chassis, fenders, licence plate and wheel of a car, as easily as if they were biscuits. 'Can you lay eggs?', asks Charley; 'Sure, and I can hatch 'em too!' comes the reply. The bird obligingly lays an egg and pops it on a paraffin stove to incubate. Seconds later the egg rolls around on the floor, and we hear cheeping: but in a *tour de force* of animation, what hatches out is not another bird, but an entire Model A Ford, unfurling from a smut of black fabric that grows first to a deflated rubber bag, then into a

hood, radiator and cab that soon sits up on its fenders and wheels, finally growing a steering wheel, windscreen, roof and headlights (Fig. 3).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The sequence takes all of 40 seconds, and was presumably made by slowly dismantling an actual car, then reversing the film.²⁸ The Model A only entered production at the very end of 1927, so Bowers must have broken up a new or nearly new car, no doubt at some expense. Notwithstanding its slapstick genre, some deft critical messages are being proposed here. King notes how Bowers draws upon a fascination for technical invention as entertainment, using his films to create a 'delirious *mise-en-abyme* of mechanical spectacle'.²⁹ While the animated car is the latest model, for Bowers it is pre-modern or (as King argues) antimodern magical thinking rather than the rhythms of the contemporary assembly line that hold sway. In the context of Breton's response to *It's a Bird*, Bowers' heady mixture of subverted technology, poetic imagination and brazen imposture can be linked both to surrealism's radical political critiques and its recurring fascination with crackpot inventions. In the very first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, Louis Aragon reported on the Concours Lepine – an annual Paris trade fair showcasing innovations and gizmos – enthused by its display of poetic-philosophical thinking, pure invention proposing 'a novel relationship between materials' in a dialectic that generates the surreal and propagates social change: 'invention is summarized by the establishment of a surreal relationship between concrete elements whose mechanism is inspiration.'³⁰

For Charley, the metal-eating bird is a chance to use poetic inspiration to switch the polarity of progress, transforming grifting into a full-scale takeover of industrial production: 'I've got a great idea!', he announces, 'We'll start a flivver factory' (a 'flivver' is a cheap, poorly-produced car). The bird laughs uproariously and dashes Charley's hopes at the film's close: 'We metal birds only lay one egg every hundred years!' But the storyline of a hybrid reality connecting nature and machine, (African) wildness and 'civilised' progress and economy, is one Bowers also explored in previous works. When he animated an ostrich egg in *Say Ah-h* (1928; 14 minutes; USA), it had hatched into a *bricolage* ostrich made from the random found materials Charley grinds for bird feed at

his farm – a pillow, broom, shoes, trousers and feather duster. This object-bird again eats metal, dances to the gramophone and lays eggs that produce more hybrid hatchlings, turning the farm's production principle on its head. It's an attitude that by 1937 would have chimed well with surrealists in France who, as Abigail Susik has shown, were producing artworks and texts that not only staged a complex critique of labour, capitalism and economy in contemporary society, but often did so specifically through the vehicle of hybridised forms that problematised bodies and machines, nature and artifice, in ways that could be poetic and political at the same time.³¹

Between humour, object and myth

1937: the date of Breton's discovery and enthused reception of *It's a Bird* is significant, dropping Bowers's film precisely at a turning point in European history and a moment of intersection between two major conceptual currents for Breton and his colleagues: one a predominant focus for surrealist research and practice throughout the 1930s that would come to a head in the 1938 *International Surrealist Exhibition* in Paris, the object; the other that for Breton was just coming into focus, humour. These twin poles of attraction, humour and the object, seem to have been activated in Breton's viewing of *It's a Bird*, and they offer the dynamic for a surrealist reading of this film (and of Bowers's work more generally).

With its choreography of perverted material relations and morphologies, *It's a Bird's* animation parallels surrealism's attention to found and created objects from the early 1930s onwards. As the decade progressed, this theme produced some of surrealism's most familiar and enduring works, expanding into the stunning installations and environments of its later exhibitions.³² The determining spark for this collective research, however, was a game of 'Symbolically Functioning Objects', devised by Dalí in 1931, in which participants concocted spontaneous assemblages from found materials before subjecting them to analytical readings, in a playful dialogue between *bricolage* and psychoanalysis.³³ Significantly, movement was a notable feature of the resulting constructions, and indeed Dalí's proposal was prompted by a work that fascinated the group, powered by the ambivalent motion of an object: Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930-31). Giacometti's category of 'mobile and mute' objects – carved sculptures the audience was invited to manipulate or activate in a zone between desire and anxiety – seemed to promise that objects springing from the unconscious or seen in dreams (as

Breton had suggested as early as 1925) could indeed be made tangible and animate, forcing their way into the everyday realm.

Breton's own forays into sculpture from the mid-1930s onwards, his *poèmes-objets*, also sometimes featured moving parts, such as *Rêve-objet* of 1935 which staged a model hotel corridor whose doors opened to reveal objects, images and messages. Taken together, one senses that an actual or latent animation lies behind many of surrealism's object experiments of the 1930s. This argument gains traction when we notice that, as Georges Sebbag points out, the theme of 'animated painting' – the idea that painted images (especially images of objects) would also imply their motion and development over time – preoccupied Breton around the same period he saw *It's a Bird*, specifically in recounting a dream about the work of surrealist painter Óscar Domínguez from February 1937.³⁴ We might thus agree with Sebbag that the projection of *It's a Bird* some months later chimed with Breton not just as a revelation but as a culmination of his recent thinking about the animation of the object and image realms.

If *It's a Bird* speaks to the fascination of the object, its framing within slapstick – with ancestry going back to Méliès's showmanship – situates it at the same time in the midst of the category of humour, a central concept for surrealism. As we have seen, with the exception of its final sentence Breton's note in *Minotaure* is a paragraph about film comedy from the preface to his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* – six sections from the forthcoming book were laid out on the following pages. This work, gathering extracts from 45 writers (some of them surrealists, the majority precursors) with brief introductory texts and a preface that laid claim to black humour as a sublime and liberating explosion, 'a superior revolt of the mind', had a long gestation; in particular, a version of its preface seems to have been drafted for some time. This might explain why Breton's comment on *It's a Bird* is missing from the eventual book: that it was added to an already existing paragraph, so as to complement the image in *Minotaure*. Finally published in 1940 (though censorship delayed distribution until 1945), the project was first mooted in 1935 and largely completed by the end of the following year. The central specific term and idea of 'black humour', however, asserted itself more gradually, and indeed seems to have crystallised around the very period in 1937 when Breton encountered *It's a Bird*.³⁵

We might object that the sovereign qualities Breton claims for black humour feel a considerable distance from the anarchic world of Bowers's animated comedy, to which the viewer's response is more likely glee than *gravitas*. The answer is partly that Breton's is a capacious category, with space aplenty for ridicule, nonsense or Dada facetiousness – not to mention that of course cinematic humour, represented by silent comedy, is invoked in his preface. Not enough has been said about Breton's own capacity for humour and laughter – Breton whose writings and thought can be solemn and demanding, but of whom Robert Benayoun (a surrealist colleague as well as specialist in cinema, comedy and animation) would say that he laughed 'with all of his being'.³⁶ But it perhaps also lies in the backstory for his thinking about humour, which during the mid-1930s drew upon the specifically Hegelian concept of 'objective humour' – thus aligning it not only with objects, but also with another key idea from this era, and placing both under the sign of material but imaginative forms in the dialectic connecting inner and outer realms: objective chance: 'these, strictly speaking, are the two poles between which surrealism trusts it can generate the brightest sparks.'³⁷

Among the least understood of his theoretical proposals – in part because the term 'black humour' passed into popular parlance with almost no reference to its original context – *humour noir* does not simply concern comedy and laughter: it is a profoundly ethical concept, flooded with pessimism and intensity, marshalled at moments of crisis but also capable of resolving or sublimating them: a kind of 'lightning rod' of the mind, as Breton would title his preface. The quality of blackness has particular resonance here, shadowed no doubt by the impending sense, as Breton's project trailed on through the decade, of looming political and moral catastrophe, but also with shades of night and occult revelation. This is the sense of gravity and dark illumination Breton identifies with *It's a Bird*: transporting the viewer 'into the very heart of the black star'. As Sebbag observes, for Breton the figure of the black star aligns with the tragic euphoria of Friedrich Nietzsche's last letters, but it is also associated with the zone of dream, where the 'Jeu de Marseille' card deck of 1941 designed by surrealists gathered at the Villa Air-Bel in Marseille featured one suit allocated to Dream whose emblem would be a black star.³⁸ For Breton, as his note on *It's a Bird* concludes, this black star shines its penetrating but hermetic light at the precise confluence – and reconciliation – of the realms of 'the real and the fabulous', in other words where the everyday material world meets the domain of myth.³⁹

Surveying the condition of animation in 1963, surrealist film critic Robert Benayoun reached for an avian metaphor to best sum up its mercurial state: part roadrunner (in homage to Chuck Jones), part owl, above all phoenix, he emphasised its will to activate the forms of the everyday realm in an 'irresistible delirium of movement', and its essence as an explosion of 'gags'.⁴⁰ In this light, then, animation stages its encounter between the given realm of things as they appear, and the insurgent possibilities of humour, personified as an emanation of protean nature, soaring above the world we know. Breton's keynote text of 1937 'Limites non-frontières du surréalisme' had defined objective humour as 'a synthesis of the imitation of nature in its accidental forms on the one hand, and humour on the other. Humour, as the paradoxical triumph of the pleasure principle over real conditions and the moment when these are judged to be least favourable'.⁴¹ It is in this sense that at a turning point in history Breton reads *It's a Bird* across a web of tensions and communications between material, myth and poetry, between tangible and psychic or imaginative zones, in which objectifying humour and subjectivised objects might align, and to which Charley Bowers's work gives privileged access. For a moment, in Breton's gamble on an alignment of humour and the object, at the fulcrum that is 1937, animation is an exemplary surrealist practice.

¹ André Breton, Untitled text ['It's a Bird – Harold Muller'], *Minotaure*, no. 10 (winter 1937): 2; all translations are by the author. Aside from this final sentence, the text is repeated verbatim in the preface to his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), 19.

² Though several DVD compilations are available, the one used here is the Lobster Films anthology *Charley Bowers: Un génie à redécouvrir* (2014), containing the complete extant works and a booklet by Serge Bromberg. Bowers's films are also readily accessible online.

³ 'Panorama du demi-siècle', *Almanach surréaliste du demi-siècle*, *La Nef*, nos. 63-64 (March 1950): 207-23 (18); Ado Kyrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Ramsay, 1985), 190.

⁴ Marcel Duhamel, *Raconte pas ta vie* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), 232 and 327-28. See also Louise Beudet and Raymond Borde, *Charles R. Bowers ou le mariage du slapstick et de l'animation. Les Dossiers de la Cinémathèque*, no. 8 (Toulouse and Montreal: Le Cinémathèque de Toulouse / La Cinémathèque Québécoise, 1980), 41-42; Louise Beudet and Raymond Borde, *Du nouveau sur Charley Bowers*, *Archives*, no. 3 (January-February 1987), 6. These two sources are the most extensive publications on Bowers's life and work.

⁵ Beudet and Borde, *Bowers ou le mariage*, 39-41.

⁶ H. R. [Hal Rammel], 'Stop Motion Marvellous', *Arsenal; Surrealist Subversion*, no. 4, (1989): 97.

⁷ For an overview of this rediscovery, see Beudet and Borde, *Du nouveau sur Bowers*, 1-2, and the documentary by Christophe Coutens, *À la recherche de Charley Bowers*, 2003, in Lobster Films, *Charley Bowers*.

⁸ Raymond Borde, 'Le film retrouvé: le mystère Bricolo', *Midi/Minuit Fantastique*, no. 17 (June 1967): 62-65.

⁹ A notable contribution is Rob King's 'The Art of Diddling: Slapstick, Science and Antimodernism in the Films of Charley Bowers', in *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark, et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011), 191-210. (Page references below are for the e-book version.)

¹⁰ Bromberg, leaflet for Lobster Films, *Charley Bowers*, 7. On the authorship question see King, 'Art of Diddling', 3 and note 8.

¹¹ Bromberg, leaflet for Lobster Films *Charley Bowers*, 4; King, 'Art of Diddling', 3.

¹² James Quirk, 'An Impression of Charley Bowers', *Photoplay Magazine* (February 1928): 13; Bromberg, leaflet for Lobster Films, *Charley Bowers*, 4-5; Beaudet and Borde, *Du nouveau sur Bowers*, 6-7.

¹³ Beaudet and Borde, *Du nouveau sur Bowers*, 8-11.

¹⁴ Bromberg, leaflet for Lobster Films, *Charley Bowers*, 4.

¹⁵ Coutens, *A la recherche de Bowers*, in which Borde recalls that the first reels he rescued came from a *gitan* (gypsy).

¹⁶ King, 'Art of Diddling', 2-4. On Bowers's films as critique of technology, see also Beaudet and Borde, *Du nouveau sur Bowers*, 4.

¹⁷ King, 'Art of Diddling', 9.

¹⁸ For example Kyrrou, *Surréalisme au cinéma*, 60ff.

¹⁹ Méliès's film output began in 1896, the year of Breton's birth (most of his early colleagues were around the same age or younger); since prints soon went out of circulation, it could have been hard for surrealists to see them until the rise of the French ciné-clubs in the 1920s began to revisit film histories. Jacques Brunius notes how Méliès's innovations were 'already half-forgotten' by 1918 ('Experimental Film in France', in *Experiment in the Film*, ed. Roger Manvell (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), 60-112 (65)). An early Méliès retrospective was held in 1929 at Studio 28, close to Breton's home and the opening venue for *L'Âge d'or* the following year. (La Belle Équipe, 2016, <https://www.la-belle-equipe.fr/2016/12/29/apres-gala-georges-melies-a-salle-pleyel-decembre-1929-nouvel-art-cinematographique-1930/>).

²⁰ The best introduction remains Paul Hammond's *Marvellous Méliès* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1974). Méliès's interest in magic also includes allusions to alchemy, another factor likely to arouse surrealist attention. On the prehistory of animation in technologies of automata, another surrealist fascination also related to Bowers's works, see Siegfried Zielinski, 'Expanded Animation: A Short Genealogy in Words and Images', in *Pervasive Animation*, ed. Suzanne Buchan (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 25-51.

²¹ Kyrrou, *Surréalisme au cinéma*, 70 and 134.

²² Brunius, 'Experiment', 65-66.

²³ Hammond, *Méliès*, 34 and 90. Historians have located earlier instances of stop motion, but Méliès was the first to proliferate the technique.

²⁴ See for example Ray Harryhausen and Ray Dalton's *A Century of Model Animation: From Méliès to Aardman* (London: Aurum, 2008), which begins its history with Méliès (38). Hammond notes the morphology of forms in Méliès's world, his 'willingness to grant objects complete semantic liberty in ceaselessly transforming them into other objects', and his tendency to treat actors like puppets (*Méliès*, 89 and 128). An instance of 'conventional' animation is discussed on page 97.

²⁵ This framing has led to suggestions that Lowell was the author of *It's a Bird*. The continuity between the film and previous Bowers/Muller works makes this seem unlikely, though there are intimations that the film was originally planned as the first in a sequence of 'Tall Stories' under the umbrella of Lowell's brand (see King, 'Art of Diddling', 3 and note 9). The book, in print for many years, includes stories such as 'The Wooden-Legged Cat', 'The Convivial Snake' or 'The Frostbitten Car' that echo themes in *It's a Bird*.

²⁶ These problems also chime with the less savoury aspects of Thomas's views, which included recurring racist tropes in his adventure tales. See Juli Kearns, 'It's a Bird',

Letterboxd.com, May 2021, <https://letterboxd.com/idyllopus/film/its-a-bird/>. Put together, these serious reservations might also account for Breton's omission of his comment about *It's a Bird* from the preface to the *Anthology of Black Humour*.

²⁷ For comparison, consider the celebrated stop-motion work by O'Brien, whose first forays dated from 1915 but whose major successes came only with sequences for *The Lost World* (1925) and *King Kong* (1933). The animation in these films, however, strive for a credible realism where Bowers's world is anything but. For an overview of this early history, see Harryhausen and Dalton, *Century of Model Animation*, chapters 2 and 3.

²⁸ If *It's a Bird* lampoons mechanisation, such animation demands serious effort. Joseph Losey, who worked with Bowers towards the end of his life, remembered him as "a tireless worker and obviously a first-rate technician ... His work seemed like endless labour" (in Coutens, *A la recherche de Bowers*).

²⁹ King, 'Art of Diddling', 2.

³⁰ Louis Aragon, 'L'Ombre de l'inventeur', *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 1 (December 1924): 22-24. Inventions are a theme of Jacques Brunius's surrealist documentary about inspired amateurs, *Violons d'Ingres* (1939; 32 minutes; France) which features an appearance from Méliès and closes with brief animated sequence about astronomy.

³¹ Abigail Susik, *Surrealist sabotage and the war on work* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), for example chapter 3. One direction to take this might be Bowers' interest in staging mechanical animals, as an emanation of animation's powers to instil a vital life force in the inanimate: see Zielinski, 'Expanded Animation', 26-27 and 31-32.

³² The 1938 *International Exhibition* famously featured Dalí's *Rainy Taxi* installation, made from an actual car, extending the recurring theme of amorphous automobiles in his contemporary work; did Dalí see *It's a Bird*?

³³ Salvador Dalí, 'Objets surréalistes', *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, no. 3 (December 1931): 16-17.

³⁴ Georges Sebbag, *Breton et le cinéma* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2016), 79-88. As Sebbag details (80-82), Breton wrote an unpublished text, 'La Peinture animé', the previous summer. We might also recall that the dialectic between movement and rest (the category of the 'explosive-fixed') is embedded in another of Breton's defining concepts of the 1930s, convulsive beauty.

³⁵ For an overview of the book's publishing history see Étienne-Alain Hubert's presentation in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, volume II, ed. Marguerite Bonnet *et al.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 1745-70. In a letter to his publisher in September 1936 (1761) Breton mentions *humour noir* as one of several possible title options, but the decision to organise the project around this term, and develop its concept, only emerged later.

³⁶ Robert Benayoun, *Le Rire des surréalistes* (Paris: La Bougie du Sapeur, 1988), 13.

³⁷ André Breton, 'Limites non-frontières du surréalisme', in *La Clé des champs* (Paris: Pauvert, 1979), 13-24 (p. 18). This text, first published in February 1937, does not yet specify the category of *humour noir*, which Breton presumably decided upon later that year; the idea of objective humour, and its relation to objective chance, had already been presented in his 1935 lecture 'Surrealist Situation of the Object'.

³⁸ Georges Sebbag, 'The Animated Painting of the Surrealist Dreamer', in *Surrealism and the Dream*, ed. José Jimenés (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2013), 55-74 (72). Kyrou (*Surréalisme au cinéma*, 70) would demand to view authentic films by Méliès, 'the ones that in a corner of the set bear the most marvellous trademark: a black star' (a reference to the logo for Star Films).

³⁹ Here we might note once again the resonance – in terms of Lévi-Strauss's formulation – of the animated marvellous of Bricolo's world as mythopoetic *bricolage*.

⁴⁰ Robert Benayoun, 'Le Phénix de l'Animation', *Positif*, nos. 54-55 (July-August 1963): 1-14.

⁴¹ Breton, 'Limites non-frontières', 17.