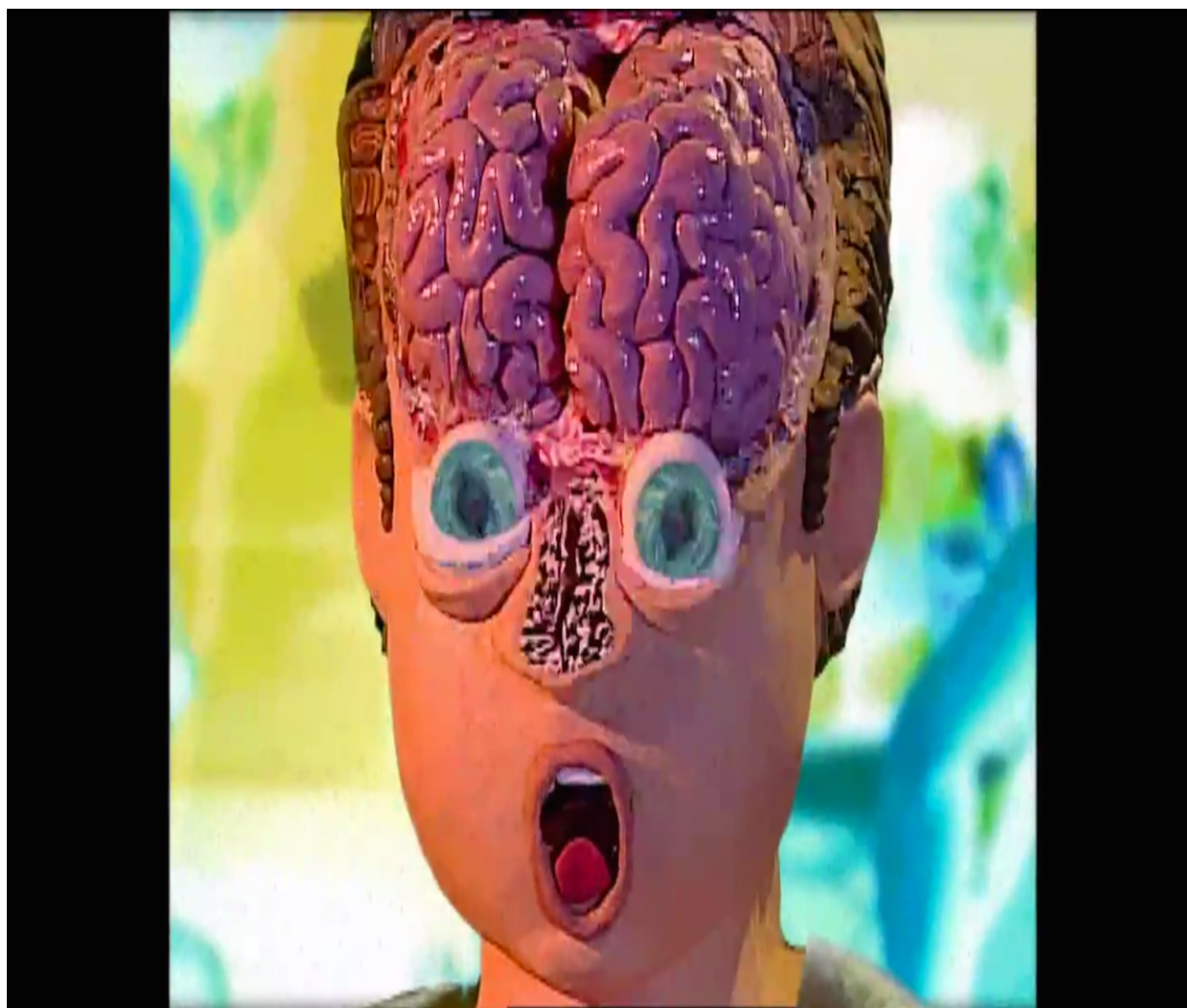


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The Crude and Chaotic Art of "Strata-Cut" Claymation

by [Tanner Tafelski](#) on September 8, 2016



Footage from the 'acid trip' sequence in an episode of 'Gary and Mike' (2001) (still by the author for Hyperallergic)

David Daniels's animation is explosive. Candy-colored Plasticine clay objects and human figures convulse. The animation teems with energy, its movement ceaseless and frantic. Overloading the brain, Daniels illuminates the sliced blobs of smeary clay with strobe lights. The writhing animation looks unhinged, but it's a type of controlled chaos called "Strata-cut" that he pioneered.

"The process is like juggling fireworks," Daniels said in an interview with [Art of the Title](#). "You want to have everything as loud as possible in all different ways while maintaining a coherent strategy." Later this week, Anthology Film Archives [will screen](#) a program featuring Daniels's trippy Strata-cut work.

Strata-cut is a tricky, labor-intensive subgenre of claymation. To put it as simply as possible, the animator shapes lines of clay of different colors into a loaf. With a blade, the loaf is cut at an angle toward the camera. The slicing reveals recognizable forms ([a blinking eyeball](#), [letters](#)) packed

in the inner layers of the loaf. As the loaf is cut section by section, the camera records a frame for each slice, creating a jittery sense of motion. The angle of the cut determines how fast or slow the shape moves when filmed.

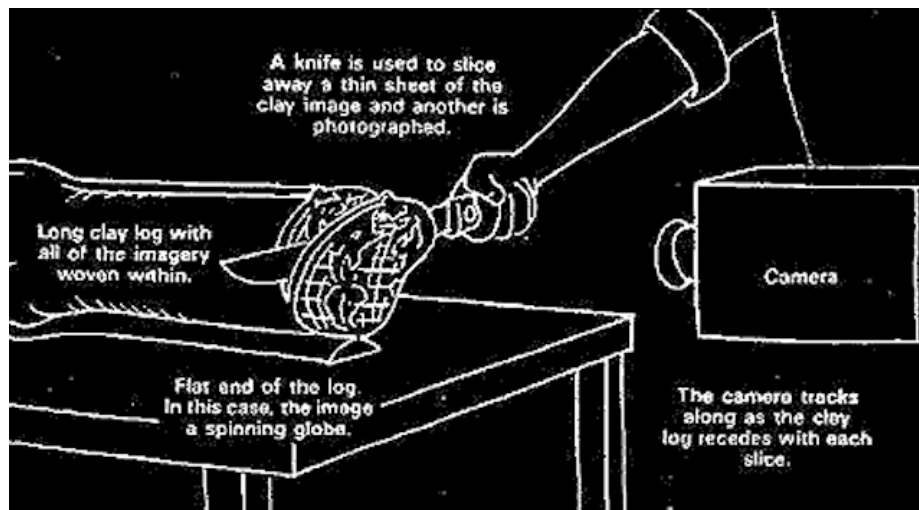
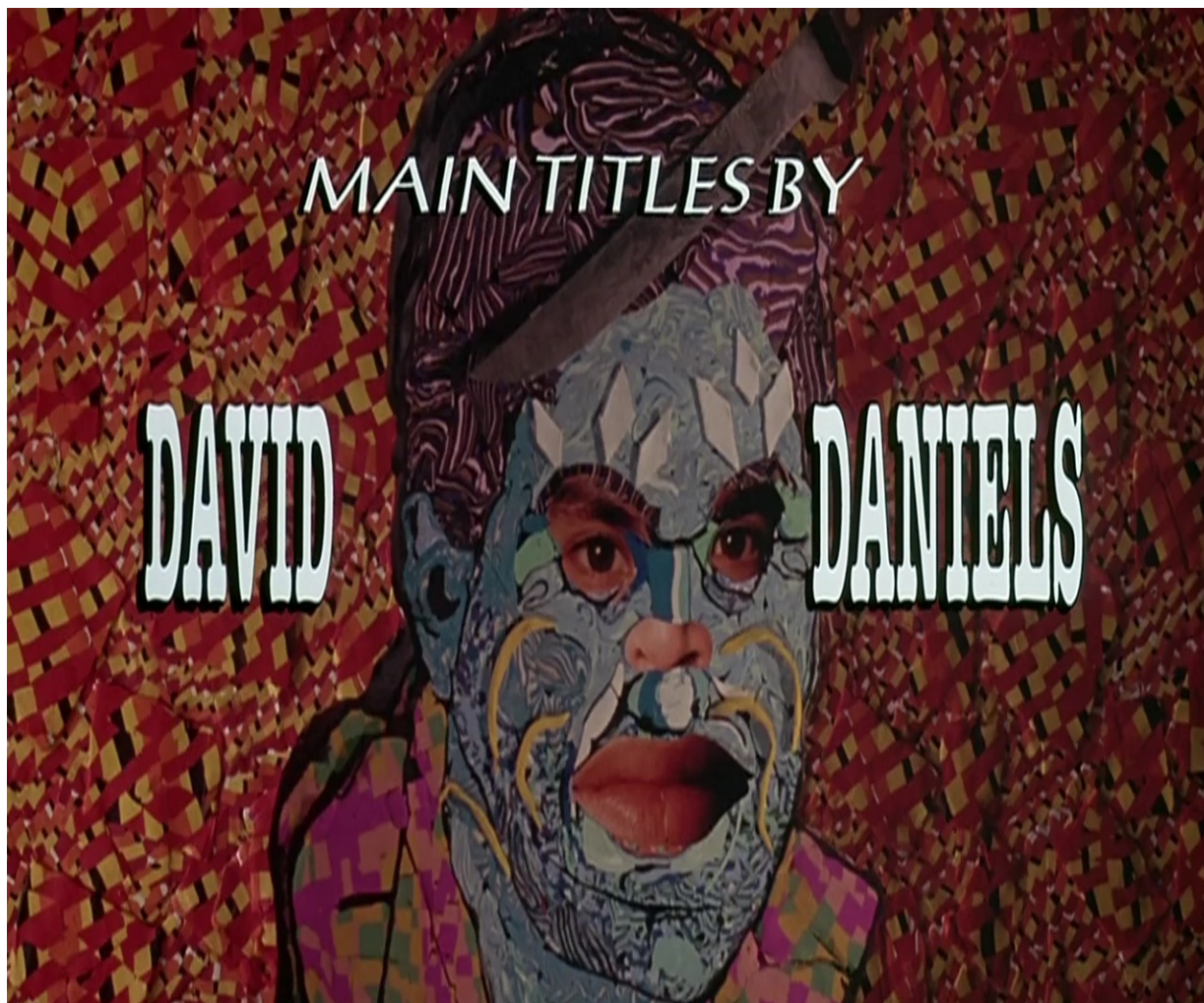


Diagram of how Strata-cut works (image courtesy Stop Motion Works)

A precursor to Strata-cut is found in the work of German animator [Oskar Fischinger](#). In the 1920s and '30s, he experimented with cutting crude wax figures from a machine he built. Make no mistake though: Daniels is the animator who refined, as well as defined Strata-cut. As he has said on several occasions, Daniels discovered Strata-cut at an early age. When he was five, he and his sisters, Shelley (who would go on to sculpt Jack Skellington and early Pixar characters) and Cary, created Clay Town. Playing long into the night, the children would imagine scenarios to go with their sculpted town. When Daniels was eight, Shelley molded him a birthday cake out of clay. When sliced up, to his delight, Daniels found the patterns inside the cake clean and intact.

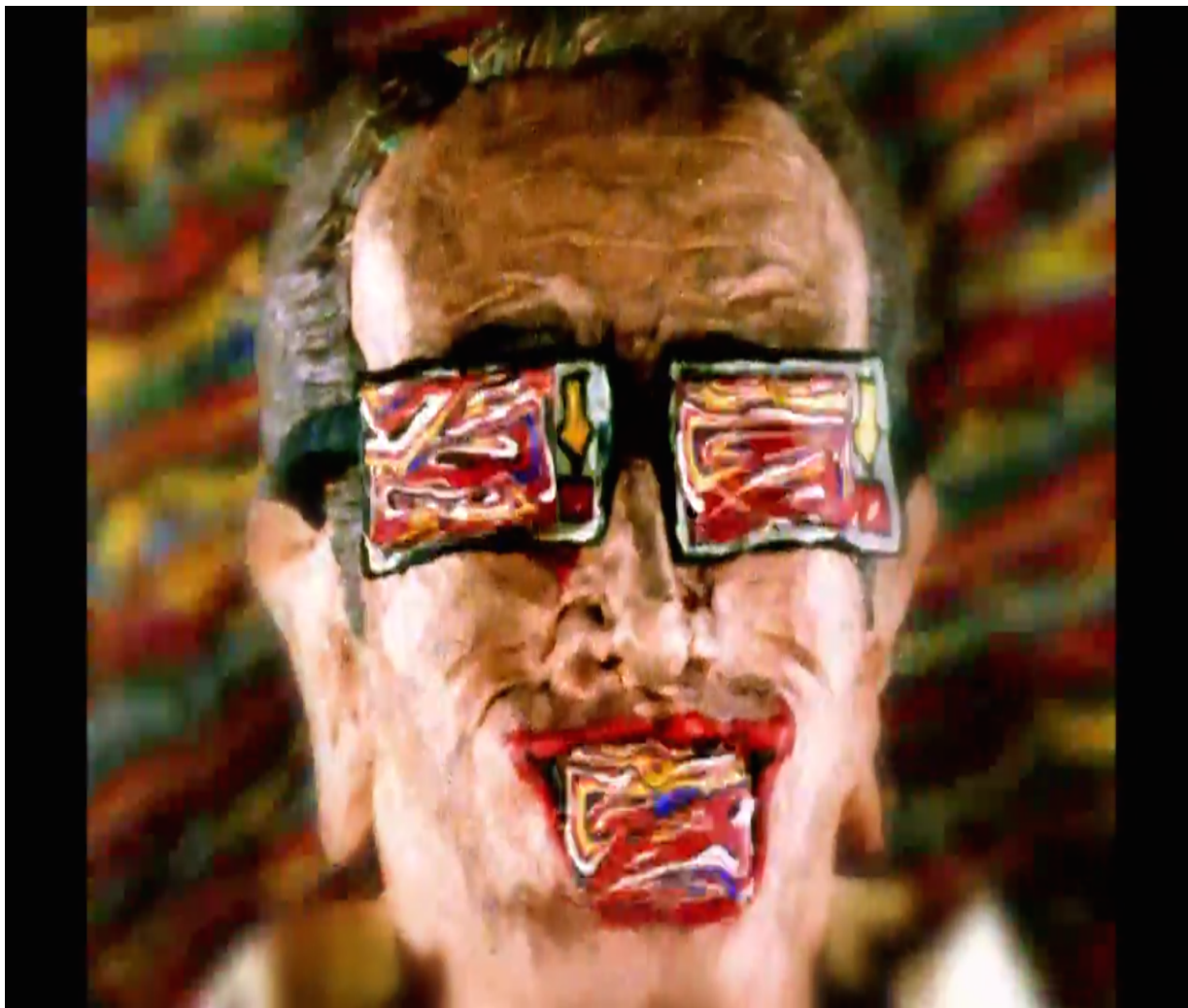
This formative moment in young Daniels's life would go on to define his artistic output in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, working for television channels, television shows, and on music videos. In fact, Daniels paid homage to his eight-year-old moment in a [TV spot for MTV](#). Over a snippet of The Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows," a wedge quickly grows into a two-tiered birthday cake. You can also find Daniels's Strata-cut animation in [Peter Gabriel's "Big Time"](#) music video, especially in the last minute when Gabriel sings about his car, house, eyes, mouth, and belly getting bigger. In the third episode of the short-lived Claymation show, *Gary and Mike* (2001), Daniels's Strata-cut appears in an acid trip sequence. Using a 600 lb. block of clay, Daniels slices into the head — clay brain, eyes, mouth, and all — of Gary in this arch bad trip.



Opening title credit for 'Freaked' (1993) (still by the author for Hyperallergic)

In Tom Stern and Alex Winter's *Freaked* (1993), Daniels makes the best part of the movie: [the title sequence](#). Daniels's animation matches the absurd mess of a film that is *Freaked*. Scored to the howl of Henry Rollins and Blind Idiot God, Daniels's flashing and spastic animation morphs, melts, and explodes the faces of the principle cast and crew.

Lending his services to television shows and mainstream movies, such as those mentioned earlier, improved them manifold, but nothing quite compares to Daniels's CalArts thesis, ["Buzz Box" \(1985\)](#). It's a mind melt of a student film that demonstrates Strata-cut's range. A zany structuralist film, "Buzz Box" consists of sections, each devoted to a day of the week, and with each day, a different kind of TV program — news, entertainment, sports, and more. Daniels emulates media saturation in the entertainment industrial complex. "Buzz Box" is prescient in the second decade of the 21st century, where information overload is a reality with the internet and social media. As Drew Neumann's [plunderphonic](#) score repeats sounds and sound bites ("Buy or die" is a notable one), swirls of pastel colors appear on the screen like melting ice cream. The intense short features recurring shots of entranced eyes. "Buzz Box" enthralls and stupefies, attracts then repels as it goes on. "I was trying to seduce and abuse [the audience] at the same time," Daniels said in the same *Art of the Title* interview. In 2005–2006, he [remixed](#) his short for the worse. He trimmed it to nine minutes, diluting its potency, and numbing its necessary nausea.



Footage from 'Buzz Box' (1985/2005–2006) (still by the author for Hyperallergic)

In recent years, Strata-cut is sorely missed. In a world of Pixar and CGI, it has fallen out of fashion, and Daniels can't get funding for projects. "When I was doing this in what I could call the heyday of the '80s and '90s, there was actually more openness to unusual things and to the possibility of a random outcome," Daniels said to *Art of the Title*. "They're [agencies] very scared of random outcomes now — they want to control because everybody's afraid — so I'm not getting as many pieces of commissioned work."

No matter though, because Daniels is a busy man. He cofounded and manages his Portland-based animation studio, [Bent Image Lab](#). He designed the talking M&M guys, and directed their first 12 TV spots. Most recently, Daniels worked on a platform for Augmented Reality technology, "[youARTM](#)." He needs to pick up Strata-cut again, though. In an age where digital animation featuring cute anthropomorphic animals dominates, the crude, chaotic, and lo-fi Strata-cut is refreshing. Here's hoping Daniels returns to his roots, and goes back to juggling fireworks.

A selection of David Daniels's shorts [will screen](#) at the Anthology Film Archives as part of its [Show & Tell](#) series on Saturday, September 10, 7:30pm

[Anthology Film Archives](#)[Claymation](#)[David Daniels](#)[Strata-Cut](#)