

AFTER NOW: ON ED ATKINS

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*don't want to hear any news on the radio
about the weather on the weekend. Talk about that.*

The author of these words is no longer with us;
their speaker never really was.

*Once upon a time
a couple of people were alive
who were friends of mine*

*The weathers, the weathers they lived in!
Christ, the sun on those Saturdays.*

Radio, people, sun, lived experience: all bygones now, in the manifest futurity – or, perhaps, mirrored present – of Ed Atkins's video *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths* (2013). The lines above, from Gilbert Sorrentino's 1971 poem 'The Morning Roundup', are recited here by a computer-generated avatar, situated, we're told, on the lightless ocean floor of the Marianas Trench. In that uncanny subaquatic valley, amid outrageous grades of water pressure analogous to informational density, the digitised protagonist appears wholly immersed: plugged with white earbuds, fingers tapping at a fingerprint-smudged rendering of a touchscreen that separates him from us. We know he's underwater because his long brown hair, a triumph of code, trails behind and above him like a surrogate body, a corpse, or sometimes wholly obscures the head, the default site of subjectivity. Talk about *that*.

Or talk about bodies and corporeality in general, the leitmotif of the wandering soliloquy that Sorrentino's lines punctuate – a monologue as physicality-obsessed as Leopold Bloom's – and the imagery that backs it. Verbal and visual references are made to ankles, hearts, kidneys, groins, 'cakey sex', water splashing sparkingly on a dry hand, sand-caked buttocks, involuntary coughs: all very distant from existence down here. Or talk about talking. The language, subtitles redoubling the verbal excessing, continually gravitates to overflow, grotesquery and rancorous rushes of materialist detail, as if sheer garrulity could compensate for all that's evidently lost. The young man, when not listening to a pan-historical mix of opera, chorales and soft-edged pop, plays the ersatz DJ, skipping the weather but giving

shout-outs to everything from forgotten laundry and microscopic worldly textures to 'you'. He's very alone in multiple ways and angrily aware of what he lacks, and violence aerates his speech. Subjects, notably, are repeatedly framed in weaponised terms, from Leonardo di Caprio's head to the issue of how to make a gun, to language itself, which here is constantly pressurised too, straining to define a slice of reality via nervily accumulated metaphors.

Amid this, and relatedly in terms of definition and knowing, the speaker returns to the poet and his absent friends, phrasing the late writer's lines differently each time. Though these operate as a chorus, a formal structuring device, it's also as if the speaker – while, he says, at the bottom of the fucking sea, literally entrenched – were frenziedly attempting to grasp actual experience, a haptic past, through the slim pained channel of the poem, itself a surrogate for this computerised wraith's own experience. If *Warm, Warm, Warm...* were linear enough to suggest a fixed narrative, rather than being itself a kind of outsized digital tone poem, we might say that the Singularity has happened but the memories, real or implanted, are killers. (The present writer is not going to get into the implicit crossovers with object-oriented philosophy, though they feel tenable if a viewer desires them.) *Remove* is a word that the mix of melancholia, anger, impotence and disembodiment in *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths* calls to mind. (*After* is another.) Irrevocable remove and a titanic tragic straining against it: a shout-out issuing from a kilometres-deep airless realm built of language, pin-sharp images, plasticised renderings and glassy flatness. The presiding context of this work, built as it is using motion-capture and modelling software and hardware, is, unambiguously, the digital sphere and its discontents.

That was the case too in the High Definition videos that Atkins made between 2009 and his debuting of a CG orator in *A Tumour (in English)* (2011), built as they were on broken syntaxes, nature imagery that looked stock even though it wasn't, and constant irruptions in the sheeny audio-visual surface. He chose HD—while also spurred by Maurice Blanchot's thinking on death and the image, particularly the latter's essay 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary' (1955), and its notion of the 'cadaverous resemblance'—because he saw its eyesight-exceeding pixel counts as flipping representation inside out, outpacing verisimilitude to become not ultra-alive but weird and deathly: representation as corpse. If that perspective was initially advertised via the

titles of works like *Death Mask 2 and 3* (2010-11) and *A Primer for Cadavers* (2011), then *A Tumour* shifted emphases, mixing High-Def and CG imagery—e.g. a queasy computerised mouth and throbbing red polyp, whereas ‘real’ heads were diversely presented from the back, to avoid a symbolic murder-through-HD. It also featured, newly for Atkins, an extended text in processed speech and subtitles that, thanks to its visceral imagery, seemingly sought to cross over and touch the viewer as the hyper-unreal visuals could not, to implant itself like a virus in the viewer’s imagination.

This notion of language as would-be saving grace, being potentially able to touch where touch is otherwise impossible, reverbs through *The Trick Brain* (2012), in which film for an auction-house CD-ROM is repurposed and in which the centuries-spanning, ethnography-oriented contents of André Breton’s apartment—prior to being sold off—are used as jetties for subjective verbal reveries, wildly attempting to hold onto something while seeing it go. And it roils around *Material Witness OR A Liquid Cop* (2012). Here, the CG speaker—a fully rendered bald male figure with Pinocchio-like extending nose—talks around a crime, or series of crimes. A material witness, in legalistic terms, holds information germane to criminal proceedings. But *material* here conflates with physicality and substantiality—the ‘crime’ something meta and prowled around. (This ‘witness’, it seems, was intended as the first of several.) Speaking in an abstracted recording studio—a shadowy microphone hangs above him—the speaker racks up fragments, using a consistent, generative ‘Dr...’ formulation, as if scrambling to traverse all possible lines of inquiry or, again, to find the correct defining terms. In any case, we return to bodies and the dead, to everything being somehow *past*.

‘There is an attempt here to get into the world—to get out of this unreal,’ the witness says near the start of the huge, winding monologue. One might take this as fundamental, particularly as the text cleaves to the visceral, even to the material trappings of consciousness, the brain’s very structure. There is the repeated image of a mosquito bite; ‘the admission that I’ve sleepwalked before’; a woman in Los Angeles who killed her husband, daughter and parents with a Gillette razor while sleepwalking; the admission that ‘I’ve killed in dreams’. Talk of buying a knife, traumatic brain injury, Bretonian *amour fou*. A sense of harried speaking-out before an ending that descends—along with talk of psoriatic ‘horror-hands’—from the admitted

partial influence on this work of Dennis Potter’s final televised interview, which famously included his noting that he’d named his pancreatic cancer ‘Rupert’, after Murdoch (‘so I can get close to it’): self-accounting, if comparatively sanguine, against a ticking clock.

The distending digressions—particularly the tabulations of brain matter—the direct engagement with medium, and the erratic narrator in *Material Witness* also recall another work by Sorrentino, his 1979 novel *Mulligan Stew*, which (itself building on Nabokov, Joyce and Flann O’Brien) bulges with interminable lists (e.g. of invented books in a library) and energetic intertextual gaming. The author was evidently galled by late-postmodernist literature’s progressive detachment from lived life, its ivied descent into arid academic cleverness; the novel ends up, while recognisably metafictional, speaking from the heart and guts about the format’s dangerous sterility. Such doubling, and such profound dislike of deathly distance seemingly voiced from inside the casket, are also in Atkins, whose work begins in medium-specific concerns, articulates their deleterious effects and moves towards the psychic bruising that results. In *Mulligan Stew* characters borrowed from other books but with discrete consciousness are trapped in the world of a fictional author’s novel, attempting autonomy. In Atkins’s art, characters are ensnared in the digital condition with enough awareness to know it but barely enough to do anything about it—just explode their brimming heads and talk, talk, talk about all the shocks that flesh is heir to.

Though ‘characters’ may be the wrong word, given how distant these figures are from living beings. HD can’t kill them—the ethical dimension of Atkins’s art, a contemporised cousin of Serge Daney’s thinking about the violent effects of the camera, is in full effect here—but CG can’t quite bring them to life. They flicker with a borrowed interiority, that of their maker and the fictional self he’s implanted them with, but they’re composed of traces. Human thought installed in the inhuman, they teeter hoping to tip, just as the language that perpetually floods them seemingly hopes to break through the screen, corkscrew into the mind. That fierce and forever unresolved yearning is very apparent; it might make Atkins’s films a kind of Turing Test for a shifting species. Again: does *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths* feel like the future, or does it feel like now, or don’t you understand the question?