Ed Atkins: Melancholic Avatars in HD

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Abstract

Among the most interesting artists of the emerging post-internet generation, Ed Atkins (Oxford, b.1982) refers to both the history of cinema and electronic media in his film production. His high-definition video animations are conceived as lacanian moments of retrospection and stream of consciousness that explores materiality and corporeality in the digital era. Some of them show hyper-real melancholic self-portraits, avatars that talk about loneliness and illness.

This paper takes into account Atkins's production focusing on the role of avatar performances in his films. Of particular interest is the atmosphere of depression that surrounds these alienated beings, which deal with issues like illness – cancer in particular – and death. No surprise that the avatar is represented as a decapitated head or a cadaver sometimes, which also become a metaphor of cinema as producer of death.

The paper also explores how the visualization of the audio-visual texture is intended to be part of the film's content, ending with considerations on Atkins's productions as mediations of previous narrative forms – cinema, literature, music – and suggesting a trans-historical comparison between the post-internet era and surrealism.

Keywords: Animation, Video Art, High Definition, Avatar, Internet.

Introduction

Among the most interesting artists of the emerging post-internet generation, Ed Atkins (Oxford, b.1982) refers to both the history of cinema and electronic media in his film production. Despite being active only for five years now, since 2009, he has already gained an impressive recognition in the art world and beyond. His high-definition video animations are conceived as lacanian moments of retrospection and stream of consciousness that explore materiality and corporeality in the digital era. Some of them show hyper-real melancholic self-portraits, avatars that talk about loneliness and illness.

Most of his films begin with a screenplay or prose piece that undergoes a process of abstraction, which include random or obscured subtitles, looping diegetic elements and manipulating the audio-visual structure. Techniques of disturbance often create a clash between the space of the viewer, that of the representation, and that around the artist's laptop at the moment of editing the film.

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The paper also explores how the visualization of the audio-visual texture is intended to be part of the film's content, ending with considerations on Atkins's productions as mediations of previous narrative forms – cinema, literature, music – and proposing a trans-historical comparison between the post-internet era and surrealism.

Avatars have a long history in both art and cinema, mainly as natural inclinations of an author to take part in the fictional narrative he creates. A painterly genre of avatars is the self-portrait, either being the only painted figure or within group scenes. An early case in point is Caravaggio, witnessing compassionate and helpless the scene in *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1599-1600).

For his 2013 participation in the performance art festival Performa, New York, Atkins curated the screening program *Man of Steel*: ten avatar performances in moving image works, including two of his. Among them, he selected videos by Vito Acconci, William Wegman, Charles Atlas, Rachel Reupke, and a 1933 cartoon of Betty Boop as Snow White directed by Dave Fleischer and Roland Crandall. Unlike Caravaggio's, these avatar performances are specific to the medium through which they take shape: film and video. Somehow they all comment on the power that technology gives us, to create surrogates of ourselves, "that appear to dismiss any sense of truth or authentic identity beneath the performance," the press release recites, "in favor of a thrall to pure surface, and artifices that speak, precisely, of nothing beneath." (*Men of Steel*, 2014).

Similarly, the history of avatars in cinema, from Frankenstein to James Cameron's inhabitants of the densely forested moon of Pandora to the recent Spike Jonze's *Her*, is built around the impossibility of duplicating human beings through scientific or technological means: behind an anthropomorphic simulacrum, there couldn't be real life.

Atkins's avatars present the same contradiction. On one hand they look computer-generated autonomous beings, on another, being surrogates, they cannot be separated from their creator. In this sense, Atkins's work is highly performative, his avatars depend upon his physicality (somatic features, voice tone and feelings), as become clear looking at the rare times when the artists performs alongside them, providing live his voice. It happened during the screening of *Man of Steel*, at the end of which, unexpectedly, he stood up among the audience, dubbing his surrogate. Or in *Depression* (2012), conceived for the Memory Marathon at the Serpentine Gallery, where he recited a prose sitting on stage, his head wrapped in a blue mask, while abstract screens alternated behind him (Image 1).

Image 1 – Ed Atkins, Depression, Performance, 2012 Memory Marathon, Serpentine Gallery, London
© Plastiques Photography Courtesy of Serpentine Gallery, London

Depression and Melancholia

The avatar, as presented by the artist, also has a psychoanalytical dimension. Since the diffusion of prosumer video technology, artists have embraced it in order to explore the way mass media create representation. As observed by American theorist Rosalind Krauss in the essay *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, early uses of video by artists like Acconci, Peter Campus, or Lynda Benglis, consisted in taking advantage of its specificity of being a simultaneous medium, using it as a mirror. Similarly, contemporary prosumer technologies and social media allow users to instantaneously create an idealized replica of themselves, an object we fail to identify with, we can say paraphrasing Jaques Lacan. The failure that comes out of a missing identification frustrates us.

Frequently, feelings like depression and melancholia are cited as direct consequences of prolonged exposure to a computer screen, either a passive or an interactive one. They are not only due to the alienation provoked by not dealing with physical reality and other human beings, but also the frustration generated by the awareness of not corresponding to the smoothness and perfectness of our surrogates and "profiles," of not being that efficient, of not having that resistance, of not being immortal.

"How has the internet affected our sense of self? Our interaction with others? The structures of family and kinship?" asks Melissa Gronlund in an article that discusses the work of Atkins and other post-internet artists (Gronlund, 2014). She uses the umbrella of the Gothic to answer the questions, but isn't it something older actually, namely that fascination for his own reflection that brought Narcissus to death?

"I depress this flatness with my thumb or the heel of my hand or my boot-heel. I bring it lower and I repeal its very condition," writes with a poetic tone the artist on the Lyon Biennial catalogue, quoting a series of actions depicted in the film *Even Pricks* (2013). "And it's not at all hard to say that I'm a black hole and that I made a black hole and around which everything turns and into which everything gazes. Not at all. The equivalence of everything is that absolutely nothing

matters and as it is with metaphor. And according to the eternal tragedies of irony, I must and am depressed similarly." (Atkins, 2013).

Atkins's films normally are born out of a writing process and often their projection is paired with the publication of booklets from which some sentences are excerpted and employed in the diegesis of the film. These booklets, as well as other artist's writings on art magazines (Atkins and Riva, 2011, and Atkins, 2014), might appear as novels sometimes, but they have a visually oriented diary-like dimension, alternating poems, notes, doodles and stock images. "I suppose a lot of my work is diary-like in that it's intimate, and that it presents glimpses of a personal but alien scenario," the artist says. "But that's tied up with an ideology of production: if I'm filming, editing and making the soundtrack myself, then I want to allow myself to seep all over it." (Obrist, 2011).

The intimate dimension reminds that of online confessions, self-made videos recorded by teenagers in front of their laptops, which collects outbursts destined to friends or to anonymous users. After all, the blurring of private and public is one of the most debated topics regarding the Internet, and that of developing conversations with anonymous counterparts an increasingly diffused habit. One of the paradoxes of the Internet, indeed, is precisely to give the user the illusion of an amplified communication, when in reality looking at a computer screen is mostly like looking at a mirror. This mechanism is clear, for instance, in video-chats where watching ourselves on a smaller portion of the screen, trying to control the external perception of our body and face, has the priority over looking at the person on the other side. Or in Jonze's film *Her*, where the ideal girlfriend is nothing but an invisible avatar generated by a computer according to the introvert protagonist's preferences (Image 2).
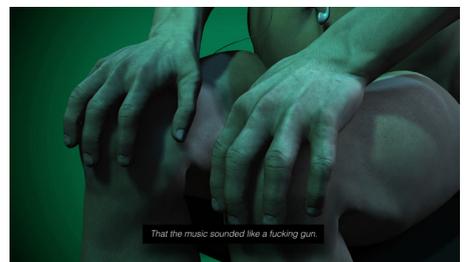

Image 2 – Ed Atkins, *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths*, 2013 Still from HD film with with 5.1 surround sound, 12 min. 50 sec. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

From Illness to Cadavers

In order to "seep" into his films, Atkins often pairs a diary-like tone with autobiographic confessions about illness and death, often referring to personal experiences like his father's death in 2009. He also looks closely at writers who coped with terminal illness, like Anthony Burgess and Roberto Bolaño, and in 2011 co-organized with Siôn Parkinson "A Dying Artist"

at ICA, London. The event consisted in two days of performances, talks and screenings exploring personal experiences with illness and death, including a talk by art critic Brian Dillon about hypochondria in relation to creativity, and the screening of Stan Brakhage's autopsy film, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), Griselda Pollock's *Deadly Tales* (1994), and Bonnie Camplin's *Cancer* (2004).

References to cancer are recurrent in Atkins's work, but the illness is specifically addressed in *A Tumour (In English)* (2011), which alternates domes, moons, black spots and a close-up on an animated mouth asking in a cavernous voice: "Would you mind checking the mole on my shoulder? […] Will you take a look, son?" (Image 3). The video has been projected at Tate Britain, London, accompanied by a booklet that promises to conjure a tumor in the viewer. "This book will change your life – It will conjure a tumor inside you […] The dimension of the tumor will be exactly proportional to the amount of text that you read. A microscopic kernel of tumorous tissue has already shuddered into being because you have stubbornly read this far." (Atkins, 2011).

Would you mind checking the mole on my shoulder?

Image 3 – Ed Atkins, *A Tumor (In English)*, 2011. Still from HD video, 12 min. 30 sec. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

After terminal illness, inevitably there is death, which the artist explores in several of his works, starting with the trilogy *Death Mask* (2010-2011). The first chapter only exists as a screenplay and it's a biopic of Madame Tussauds. "It affords a way for me to write about the use of wax as a representative medium for the cadaver," he said (Beddoes, 2010). *Death Mask II: The Scent* (2010) is a biopic of Alfred Wallace, a British naturalist who wrote about "durian," a fruit known for stinking as rotting flesh (Image 4). *Death Mask III* (2011), instead, shows a foggy street descending from a mountain, the back of a girl in front of a sea, details of vegetation, and the silhouette of a head on which the flame of a candle is surrealistically juxtaposed.

Death here is not yet objectively present, but evoked through images, sounds, titles and external references of the artist during interviews to Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of the photograph as a death mask and Maurice Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary* (1951), an essay from *The Space of Literature*, in which the French post-structuralist philosopher reflects on how the human being, in the moment of death, becomes a representation of itself. "That instant, or that transition between life and death" admits the artist, "of becoming an image and a representation of a person – being able to look at a body that is devoid of being – seeing this person leave suddenly, to be replaced by just an object." (Beddoes, 2010).

Image 4 – Ed Atkins, *Death Mask II: The Scent*, 2010. Still from HD video, 8 min. 19 sec. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

Cadavers are the protagonists of the following *A Primer for Cadavers* (2011) and *Us Dead Talk Love* (2012), where dead bodies and decapitated heads are represented in all their inanimate hyper-materiality with high-definition renderings of hair, nails, and body cavities (Image 5). Texture and materiality, recurrently investigated by post-internet artists, are presented by Atkins as symbols of the objectified corporeality of the body, both the actual dead body and the digital simulacrum. "Cadavers became the best way to look at representation and, in particular, recent technologies of representation […]" he admits. "So you have the hyper-materiality of the image itself, but in the body you have nothing – you have this apparent immaterial aspect, which to me provided an echo with the dead body, being both present and absolutely absent. Heavy, dense matter." (Obrist, 2011).
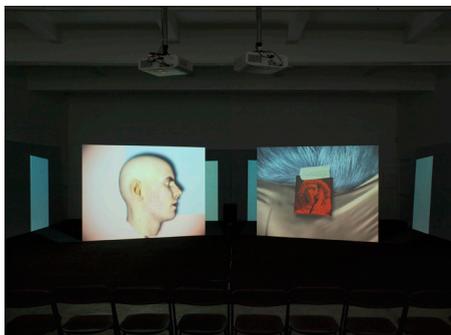

Image 5 – Ed Atkins, *Us Dead Talk Love*, Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2012. Photo: Andy Keate Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

The Digital Fracture

This hyper-material investigation of the body assumes in Atkins's work specific connotations, depending closely upon the evolution of video technologies as they become available on the prosumer market, being that of "prosumer" an eloquent

term that mixes the roles of producer and consumer. The basic hardware the artist uses, in fact, is largely available to amateurs and a generic user. Basically, it consists in a laptop (MacBook) and a digital camera (Canon EOS 5D Mark II). Regarding the processing of images, Atkins counts on video editing software, either popular like Final Cut Pro, or more advanced like the fluid and dynamic simulator Realflow. Logic Studio, a music production suite by Apple, helps him orchestrating the sound.

Current technology allows the artist to work in high definition (HD), particularly since, more recently, he started to use only computer-generated images. We define high definition any video image with more than 480 horizontal lines (United States) or 576 lines (Europe), even though 720 is generally the minimum in 2014. "HD offers the possibility of a kind of clarity previously impossible in moving image-making," says Atkins. "This clarity is most conspicuous in the representation of surfaces; skin, for example, is discernibly haired, pored and blemished. This materiality means that a certain suspension of disbelief is eroded: the balance between characters, the representation of a life on screen and the body of the actor is skewed toward the physical. One is made aware of the material of everything." (Atkins, 2012).

The side effect of the fascination for the powerful accuracy of representation offered by HD, however, is precisely that erosion of a certain suspension of disbelief that Atkins mentions. In another interview, he reminds that in "a test sequence from the new Hobbit film […] – it is shot at 48 frames per second and in 3D high definition – the audience complained that it was too real. You could see all the actors' make-up – you could see the prosthesis. Suddenly the way of capturing reality is too real, frightening even." (Guggenheim, 2012). But whether mainstream cinema keeps the effect under control, he shows us precisely its unwelcomed frightening side effect, when the excess of objective materiality corresponds to the break of the spell of fiction.

The break of fictional fantasies of self-representation is the core of Atkins's research. He uses HD technologies in a performative way to explore the limits between reality and fiction we deal with in an era when the Internet has permeated every aspect of everyday life from work to entertainment. Motion-capture technologies, in particular, help him to investigate the representation of his own self. Being available only recently on the prosumer market, software like Kinect and Faceshift make true the dream that was of virtual reality in the 1990s, of what today we call augmented reality, which is our actual reality turned into virtual through goggles, sensors and software. Kinect was developed as a motion-detecting tool to control games without hands, while Faceshift captures facial expressions and allows you to map them onto an avatar (Image 6).

The main feature of the post-internet generation of artists is the use of technology and means associated to the Internet as both the medium and the message. It is true that Atkins uses current technologies, but only to show their limits and contradictions and how they affect reality and our life. That's why the diegesis is continuously broken by fractures, glitches and loops. "Part of the role of technology in my work, I've always thought, was to speak of precisely what it is not and what it cannot do," admits Atkins. "Everything in there is constantly interrupting itself, stuttering, breaking down – but not with the logical failure of a computer, rather the 'breaking down' of '… in tears', of laughter – weeping or shouting or professing love or something similar, bursting forth." (Ruf, 2014).

Image 6 – Faceshift, screenshot of tracking, www.faceshift.com

Hauntology and Surround

Sound has a major role in Atkins's production. Body sounds like coughs, sniffs, sighing, and environmental sounds – mouse clicks, an object placed on the desk, a door which closes, or unintelligible distant conversations – are recorded during the editing process as real-life micro-events. The intent is to break that suspension of disbelief we were mentioning above or even just explore to which extent the body is able to control the effect of displacement produced by technologies.

Same concerns where at the base of those early video art experiments that Krauss examined under the paradigm of narcissism. In Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974), for example, the artist Nancy Holt describes the feelings of listening her delayed voice. *"I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me"* she says in the video.

Similarly, Atkins records his voice while simultaneously listening to it on headphones through a slight delay. "It has a strange effect where I am trying to keep up with myself…but it also slows me down. Like the trapped burps and excess saliva, it reminds the audience of the body. I want a naked, fat body, not an airbrushed one." (Ward, 2011). Actually, what we see on the screen is an airbrushed, smooth, ethereal, god-like body, but yes his cavernous voice could certainly remind us a naked fat body, like that of a pervert pedophile who impersonates a shy young girl to catch his victims online: we'll never know who or what hides behind the Facebook profile of a person we don't know in person.

The soundtrack also is affected by these micro real-life events. Atkins employs a lot of stock footage in his films. The drop in the pool and the fabric in *Us Dead Talk Love* (2012), for example, are available for free for Final Cut Pro users to be used for DVD menus, as

well as the typographical effects in *Even Pricks* (2013) (Image 7). Seemingly, stock sounds accompany these images, motives that our mind immediately associates to cinematic moments. It reminds us of Jack Goldstein's *Suite of Nine 7-inch Records with Sound Effects*, (1976) – a German shepherd barking, a burning forest, a fast run, etc. – a quintessential work to understand the interest of the Pictures Generation in investigating how mass media create clichés we tend to identify with.

Passer à travers ce dans quoi on est déjà passé.

Image 7 – Ed Atkins, *Even Pricks*, 2013. 16:10 HD video with 5.1 surround sound, 8 min. (looped)
Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London

Atkins, however, also employs music in his soundtracks, sometimes in abundance. The soundtrack of *A Prime for Cadavers* (2011) "…contains more music per minute than the average Hollywood blockbuster. An unlikely combination of Harold Grosskopf's synth, a singular, mournful violin note from Giuseppe Tartini, one or two notes clipped from Chopin's *Raindrops Prelude*, a thump of percussion from ravel, a snatched rumble of Earth and more is interrupted by passages of "The Sign" by 1990s Swedish pop group Ace of Base." (Ward, 2011). The way he uses music is similar to that of "hauntology," a term appropriated from Jacques Derrida by music critics to describe how post-internet music genres like hypnagogic pop alternate nostalgic re-interpretations of pop songs to artificially created textures purposefully made of mistakes and echoes.

A last consideration on sound in Atkins's work regards the way sound is perceived by viewers in his video installations through surround systems. About his 2012 exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, London, he said: "I think that a gallery space, performance space or theatre introduces the reality of being near another body and feeling that body. […] The way I was thinking about the space was in-between a stage and cinema – but also a TV studio and other kinds of stages and sets which are less obvious, like the academic staging of conversations and interviews or panel discussions […]" (Guggenheim, 2012).

Even more than images, as said at the beginning of this paper, sound in these fractured compositions makes tangible that clash between real and fictional space: the micro-reality of the editing room, the fictional world represented, and the space within which we experience it. While suspended in adoration of this hyper-real universe, we are suddenly confronted to the acknowledgement of our and our neighbors' materiality.

Conclusion

Despite emerging and so far being appreciated mostly in the contemporary art world, Atkins way of working is deeply multidisciplinary, both in terms of structure and of references. No surprise, in fact, that more than art he quotes literature and cinema as sources of inspiration. Among the writers, beside Burgess and Bolaño, mentioned above, he uses to quote Donald Barthelme.

Among the movie directors, manifest and indirect references, are constantly made to Robert Bresson, Jan Svankmajer, John Cassavetes, Werner Herzog, Lars Von Trier, David Lynch and to structural filmmakers who emerged in the 1960s like Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton and of course the artist who influenced them: Stan Brackage. But "[w]hile structural film is very important to me" he reminds, "there are key elements in my work that are crucially digital, in that it concerns the mediation of cinema and TV – this is about new media as a mediation of prior categories rather than as a third category." (Kidner, 2011).

Mediation in this case is not only commenting on a previous narrative form though, but acknowledging its death. Whereas cinema, as an evolution of photography, represents a death of reality via its burning/impression on the film, digital video (particularly HD) allows to analyze this death, to undo, resuscitate reality and editing it endlessly. This is why dead bodies are representatives to understand Atkins's practice also as metaphors of the cinematic mechanism of death.

"High definition reality privileges the representation of texture and surface, but at the same time the 'body' of the film or video has dropped away," he says. "Even though the image itself is more concerned with physical and tactile aspects, the source of the image, the body, is no longer there – it has become ever more immaterial. […] has been replaced by representation, and has gone forever." (Guggenheim, 2012).

If reality dematerializes his films – always reminding of the human presence and real environment surrounding the author – his films then come with a vengeance and dematerialize reality. The confusion between reality and fiction is not only explored but enacted, blurring the boundaries, as we said before, between editing room, space represented and the exhibition space where these moving images are viewed. Even his material production of art objects is affected, as alongside the videos Atkins often exhibits two-dimensional collages, covered in chroma-key green paint, which recall the layered structure and tools of Photoshop.

The consequence is the formation of a sort of limbo, not dissimilar from the one within which we're immersed in our everyday life dealing with digital technologies. Atkins's interest in surrealism – as shown by the video *The Trick Brain* (2013), made of images shot inside André Breton apartment – makes us think at a renovated interest in dreams and subconscious. However, what strikes in Atkins's films, is exactly the opposite, the objective analysis of materiality that doesn't leave space for dream anymore, or what he

calls "social rehearsals which can be edited and retrieved and re-performed according to a fantasy of dematerialization. Until they are exported and presented, they are embroiled in some infinitely correctible, narcissistic body within the computer." (Biesenbach, 2013).

A previous contemporary art project that deals with avatars is *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999). Initiated by French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, it consisted in acquiring the copyright for the minor manga character Annlee, and use it in works of art, extending the rights also to other artists. The idea was to free a product from the market, but what happened has been an exploration of the introspective fantasies we project on a virtual character. "I was a frozen picture, an evidence submitted to you," Huyghe made Annlee say, "I have become animated however not by a story with a plot, no…I'm haunted by your imagination…and that's what I want from you…See, I'm not here for your amusement…You are here for mine!" (Huyghe and Parreno, 2002) (Image 8).

Image 8 – Pierre Huyghe, *Two Minutes out of Time*, 2000
Animated film, color, sound, 4 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

What makes effective Atkins's audio-visual compositions is a similar illusion of transcendence, of believing we can delegate feelings, duties and responsibilities to a machine, here interfaced by a virtual character. The power of digital technologies, in fact, is less that of facilitating our life then that of allowing us to forget we are mortal beings, therefore subjected to get ill or depressed. But behind the vectors that take the shape of a virtual young girl like Annlee, the truth is, there might be a salivating fat man, naked in his bedroom, trying to escape the confrontation with his own corporeality.

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