

THE MIDDLE AGES

“Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.”

– Dante Aligheri, *Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, canto I, 1320.

The Barbarous Ages! The Obscure Ages! The Dark Ages! The Leaden, the Monkish, the Muddy Ages! A millenary of paganism, invasion, superstition, poverty, disease, violence, feudalism, transition, intolerance, contamination, ignorance, and regression. A time in between more important times, an epoch where innovation was suspended and progress stalled. Like the midlife malady of modern man, the middle ages was a time of crisis. Things just didn't advance as anticipated. Simon Dybbroe Møller's *The Middle Ages* is populated by oddly specific beings, lonely protagonists collectively constituting a murky in-between space where things leak and break, where the civil and the ideal perform a clumsy dance with the vulgar. An assembly of roughly life-size statues standing alone, together.

A lugubrious loudspeaker hangs its heavy head and bears bulbous shopping bags of bric-a-brac. The emotional electroacoustic transducer rehearses a rash of roars, growls, bellows, and grunts. It practices the battle cries of doom and black metal, reciting low-pitched, guttural, raspy, barks of death. The growl comes from the gut, the bowels. It is an ignoble instrument of emotional energy, a subterranean torrent of exaggerated masculinity. It passes underneath, making everything tremble. The voice is machined to play the part of the animal, reciting squeals of swine and other cries of pain. Vocal turbulence pervades, pushing music's denaturalisation of the speaking voice to unintelligible extremes. The body booms sheer noises of eruption against code-structuring messages.

As an object the loudspeaker is akin to a maypole, creating a magical key-point through which the exchanges between living things and their environs come to pass. As a system of public address, it is an interface that allows the grumble of one to become a common growl. But now the war machine stands alone, a woebegone woofer subjugated to an accumulating machine doing chores. Its eponymous and essential purpose is to be loud, but it seems ashamed to implement this belligerent mode. Bags of stuff weigh down from its bolts and screws. The denatured giant regresses and practices the voices of monsters in its head, and engages in a public removal like a Byzantine hermit on a pole.

A being buttressed by a basic block. We know the trope. A figure reclining upon a pedestal. But while stone or marble belong to the tradition of classic antiquity – to the ideal – the yellowing foam of this queen-sized pedestal belongs to the body. Both bed and base, things write themselves into its code, contorting and diffusing its dense yet open cells. Soiled mattresses catalyse the most spectacular imaginations of events, a

persistence of effects even after the causes have long disappeared. Hysteresis.

Resting on this massive chunk of absorbent substance, a motor spills its fluids. “The great growling engine of change – Technology,” Alvin Toffler said. The engine has a cartoonish presence, it is a trope. It is a bleeding heart. Or an intestinal serpent of mechanisation lured from its cave and slayed. Resected and removed from the body of the automobile, we are left with vehicular viscera. We begin to think of gas-guzzlers and the gastrointestinal, of offal and catguts playing music “true”, of inputs and outputs, of wires and pipes channeling information, of parasites and snakes, and, as always, death and decay, *A Disputacion betwyx the Body and Wormes*. Liquid has discharged from the motor’s varied spouts. The engine wet the bed. The Dung Ages, the mangled middle. The drip drip drip of the body. Bodily mechanics, beastly routines.

A fallen figure portraying a butcher, its hindquarters severed and sliced up into aiguillettes. This abstracted caricature of outmoded male professionalism cuts an iconic figure – a corpulent butcher complete with striped apron, matching straw boater, ethnically-ambiguous moustache, and requisite cleaver; the tool that serves as a metonym for his violent vocation. Despite his predicament, our smiling slaughtered slaughterman summons stories of “the good ol’ days”. Subsumed into the big box of late capitalism, the local butcher has almost been replaced by the social abattoir. Industrialised production of meat separates us from its real source in animal life and animal death, shielding carnivores from the violence that feeds them. This effigy, this peculiar form of embodied advertising, guards and greets at the thresholds between parts, the social world and the mutilation within. A common variant of the jovial and portly butcher replaces the head with a smiling anthropomorphised pig. The butcher and executioner, the animal and human, are always conflated. Morals and morphologies get mixed up. We point at our own limbs, when we order a prime cut.

The butcher breaks and shapes beastly bodies, he takes them apart. He operates at a vital point in complex human, animal, and technical interactions. His role is that of dismemberment, detaching not only limbs but also detaching entities from one another, determining their membership in certain categories. Cleaved in half, loins divvied up into standardised slices salami-style, here it is the butcher’s insides that are divulged. The procedure was not surgery nor a proper “unmaking”. Anatomy is ignored. Unlike the cohabiting motor, he has been hygienically prepared. This is not a splatter flick. His foam insides are without character, definition, or articulation – no bones, muscle, marbling, or organs – only generic “meat-coloured” mush, recalling ambiguous pâtes and the sanitised pink slime snuck into hamburgers. A fractured figure rehearsing old obsessions with death and objectification.

A moving mannequin modeled after a running man gallops along despite its encasement in a full-body orthopaedic plaster cast, covered in disparate scribbles – a throwback to grade-school routines of decorating the wounded. Another injured entity, another figurative instrument of anthropomorphic advertising. This lone figure moves automatically, it has other motivations and mechanics. It finds equilibrium in its

compulsive and jerky movements, rolling its parts and grinding its gears. While no longer inert, it is isolated and insulated in its cocoon, but moves along in spite of the hardening of the system. The all-encompassing bandage is an exaggeration of ultimate injury and immobilisation, of trauma and triage, a sign of fragile resilience after total catastrophe. A quintessential material of sculpture, the plaster mimics the solidity of both interior skeleton and external suits of armor. It is a strange habit that the characters of our historical statuary are often cast in the same materials as our sick and infirmed. The bandages humanise the device by implying healing, but mummify the machinery; a preserved body, back from the dead to guard tombs. The messages scrawled over the plaster are a form of phatic communication, their primary role being the inauguration of a relation rather than the sharing of particular messages of compassion or solidarity. They are the result of a social network, transcriptions of the singular mortal individual's encounter with social and historical conditions, other beings and structures. The body as a bulletin board. The mannequin, as always, a platform for presentation.

A large flat screen dangles from a forklift. It shows footage of renowned Danish lyricist Peter Laugesen reciting poems culled from the last 40 years of his life's work. A heavy load of information, a meeting of the strange immateriality of post-photographic imagery and the unyielding materiality of the industrial world. Set in a dark abyss, Laugesen's reading is intercut with computer generated images of drums played by ghostly drumsticks, of smoke, and of mud. The camera's eye scrolls, pans, circles, and zooms, surveying the protagonist's body from all sides, examining and bumping into him, as an object of inquiry. In this video the modern avant-garde poet is a thing, an anachronism – at once enviable and dinosaur-like. Free and untainted by capitalism, off-grid and out of touch, almost more archetype than human. The modern poet accesses the beginning, the word, and is a medium, a machine like the loudspeaker who channels voices and expressions that are not merely his own.

The Poet, or Why Can't You Trust Atoms? They Make Up Everything is a candid tribute to Laugesen's remarkable production, while borrowing and contorting the formula of a poet's portrait, which puts faces to verse and attempts to give testimony to the body of the word and the human reality of the artist. The video opens *in medias res*, with the title and opening credits repeating multiple times between sequences. Accentuating dynamics of authorship, hierarchy, and generation, Dybbroe Møller's name appears before the senior poet; a retrocausal billing. The adolescent pun of the alternate title introduces a skepticism towards the physical. Intermittent puffs of simulated smoke conjure a fog of illusion and magic, while playing with indexicality, the markers of physical relations and events – the infamous smoking gun. Stochastic rhythms play from an impossibly pristine drum kit, smoke comes from out of nowhere, and mud, a primeval sculptural material splatters the skin of the bass drum. Emerging from the dark as if *ex nihilo*, they were crafted in another black box, a computer, and were formed and carved in code. The technologies, whether the body of the man, his text, or the clumsy CGI figures of multimedia mimesis, all give bodies to information through a certain skeuomorphism, pointing to archaic forms.

In Simon Dybbroe Møller's *The Middle Ages*, the maladroit and muddled mass of masculine models mope around in a sort of purgatory, fatigued by the awareness that they are betwixt and between. A butcher, a poet, a mummy, a young cultural producer, a loudspeaker, and a bleeding heart: a motley crew of mismatched misfits. Like strange characters with different capacities on the chessboard of patriarchal late capitalist reality, they sit side by side, vulnerable and open, ready for our autopsy – in limbo between thrill and distrust, hope and cynicism. A small photograph on the wall shows an adolescent earnestly overlooking these bulky beasts, while holding a guitar. That guitar though – does he know how to play it? Not unlike an image of a baby drinking a pint of beer, or driving a car, the mimetic behavior of the young cultural producer reminds us that there is an outside to the complex and carefully cultured system we occupy. This young cultural producer accentuates the mess we are in, midway between infancy and senility. Welcome to The Middle Ages.

Post Brothers