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Circuits and Subterfuge: Emily Wardill and the Body Imaginary by Melissa Gronlund

At a symposium honouring Venturi Scott Brown & Associate’s contribution to architecture, Robert Venturi delivered his lecture in the form of a slide show, of things ‘we love’.

After a short introduction, the bulk of the presentation was simply things (or, more precisely, images and names of things) loved by him and his partner Denise Scott Brown, which the audience laughed at and with appreciatively, both in solidarity with what was being celebrated (sauerkraut! Las Vegas!) and for the switch into a non-analytic mode of expression in the midst of exalted proceedings.

This emphasis on things (or on images of things) and the straightforward listing of them is not a new idea, but for Venturi and Scott Brown, two of the founders of Postmodernism in architecture, to do this carried different valences — positive ones — versus earlier attempts in the genre, such as Georges Perec’s satire of consumerism, *The Things: A Story of the 1960s*. The novel, published in France in 1965, ends with its protagonist, an upwardly mobile Parisian couple, fleeing to Tunisia to escape all their possessions, and still being unhappy.

Perec’s novel starts almost cinematically, as a roving eye casts its glance on the items in the couple’s home: *The eye, at first, would pass along the grey fitted carpet of a long corridor, narrow and high-ceilinged. The walls would be cupboards of bright wood, on which brass fittings would gleam. Three engravings, the first representing Thunderbird, the winner at the Epsom Derby, the other the paddle-steamer the Ville-de-Monterau, the third, a Stephenson locomotive*.

This ability of objects to communicate was linked, particularly in France at that period, to Roland Barthes’s critique of advertising and of the tendency of images to suggest feelings and ideas beyond their literal meaning — that is, for an image of ripe red tomatoes to signify ‘Italianicity’, and thereby a measure of culinary freshness, or, in a contemporary example, for a countryside backdrop to signify a certain privileged class status in Britain. It appeared possible at that moment in France, for reasons both critical and literary, to write a novel out of the mere description of things. Emily Wardill’s book *We are behind* (2010), which she made with writer, artist and curator Ian White, tells a story of ‘the object’ through images and text that function with equal semantic import. The book was made around the same time as Wardill’s film *Game Keepers Without Game* (2009): a melodrama of objects that never touch each other and of a family, whose members are rendered as objects against a white background, which is attempting a reconciliation. *Game Keepers*, that is, grafts a mid-century interest in material and objective signifiers onto a different novelistic genre, melodrama, of grandiose stylisation and symbolisation.

First identified as the reigning trope in ‘weepies’ — popular films aimed at the women’s market primarily in the 1940s and 50s — the genre of melodrama in film was first identified in a seminal 1972 essay by Thomas Elsaesser. Around the same time the literary scholar Peter Brooks wrote a study of melodrama in nineteenth-century novels (primarily those of Henry James and Honoré de Balzac).

Both connected melodrama to morality and ethics, and particularly to a crisis thereof. Brooks wrote that melodrama, by its series of heightened decisions and exaggerated behaviour (Should she have an affair or leave? Should she reveal herself or suffer?) was constantly asking characters to define themselves morally. In this way melodrama accesses what he calls the ‘moral occult’ — the set of morals that persists despite no longer having any transcendent or religious basis to support it. Elsaesser read the conflicts conveyed by melodrama as attached to ideology, and specifically to conflicts stemming from class, race and various forms of repression in the home. It was no accident, he inferred, that melodrama flourished in the post-War US in the midst of normative, suburban ideals (with film-makers such as Douglas Sirk), or with New German Cinema film-makers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder in West Germany during the 1970s, in the context of a struggle about national identity in the face of a dominant consensus culture. Despite its lowly status in the filmic hierarchy, melodrama, Elsaesser wrote, could be ideologically subversive, by utilising and contesting these norms.

The genre is known for its aesthetic excess and complex modes of symbolisation, in which objects (the reproduction or description of objects) in the mise en scène are pushed to work hard: a knocked-over glass might signal breakdown and failure; fluttering autumn leaves foretell imminent loss. This saturation of agency and signification means that melodrama is often said to unfold ‘as if it were a dream’ (an expression close to the origin of *Game Keepers*, Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *Life is a Dream*, 1635—36, which avers that ‘life is a dream / and dreams, are nothing but dreams’). It seems telling that Perec’s novel is set in the conditional (‘would pass’, ‘would gleam’) rather than the factual present or past tense, and it would be interesting to think of the extent to which this ‘dreamlike’ state that one associates with filmic melodrama also resonates with moving-image work or literature that deals in articulate objects. One could think, perhaps, of the daze induced by reading what we might call ‘list’ poems, such as Charles Bernstein’s ‘My/My’ (1975), a list of objects preceded by ‘my’, and the symbolism that must be ascribed to each word in order for the mind to impute a logic not given by the words themselves.

But while the significance of the object within Wardill’s films picks up on one of melodrama’s main modes of articulation, the affinity between her films and the genre is mainly on the level of structure — in their focus on, particularly in Game...
Keepers and Full Firearms (2011), the domestic home as the site of emotional conflict and in their freighted interest in psychoanalysis.  

More important to the narrative of classical melodrama than the object is the body, which figures as both the site and sign of repression and conflict. The subjects of melodrama tend to be women, and on them the plot’s conflict is visible, largely through forms of bodily aberrance (the woman is hysterical, adulterous, infirm, etc.). This is one reason why there is such an overlap between Freudian conflict and the melodramatic: ‘Psychoanalysis’, Brooks writes, ‘can be read as a systematic realisation of the melodramatic aesthetic, applied to the structure and dynamics of the mind.’ The legibility of the body within melodrama is akin to its legibility within Freud’s method of diagnosis, in which inner emotional trauma is made visible on the patient’s body: in a case study concerning facial neuralgia, for example, he ventured that the pain on Frau Cécile M.’s cheek was related to a ‘slap on the face’ given to her by her husband. In melodrama, likewise, the body is both the site of trauma and integral to the narrative structure: it is the means by which the plot of the film or novel travels and ultimately resolves itself. Brooks writes, for example, of the croix de ma mère—a staple of melodrama that is a means on the body by which the mother recognises her child — a token she gives to him or her as a baby, or, taken more widely, marks such as Odysseus’s scar or Achilles’s heel, by which long-lost identities are ultimately revealed. In Sirk’s Imitation of Life (1959), the (colour of the) body is the source of conflict: the light-skinned African-American child Sarah Jane has tried to pass herself off for white, and in the process becomes estranged from her mother. She is, at one point, beaten up by her white boyfriend when he realises her race. The film’s catharsis comes when Sarah Jane throws herself on her mother’s coffin, begging forgiveness, in the middle of a funeral cortège made up of black church-goers and a gospel choir, thus reuniting her ‘black’ self with her ‘black’ roots. But Wardill’s interest in the codes of melodrama alters the role the female body plays in the narrative, supplanting the significance of the body with the significance of structures of regulation that the body moves within.

Game Keepers Without Game is the story of a girl, Stay, who is given up for adoption by her parents because she has been a violent child. She is put into foster care, and later her father, a fiction writer, seeks her out. The familial conflict has class implications — she speaks with a different accent and wears outsize jewellery (Wardill’s handling of these class signifiers is more subtle than this précis suggests); her father wears, as Stay points out, boring brown jumpers and likes Mozart. This Stay learns in an excruciating scene in which the father finds her in the library, where she sometimes sleeps. He wants to get to know her, to effect a rapprochement, and she, not knowing who he is, tries to prostitute herself to him. She does, eventually, return home, but her return comes not through the various conventional modes of homecoming in melodrama — recognition provided through a bodily unveiling, as of the croix de ma mère or the voie de sang (approximately, that ‘blood will out’) — but through pragmatism: Stay returns to the household because she is going to be released from the foster care system in which she finds herself, and her only options are to join the list for council housing, become pregnant to jump the list or ingratiate herself with her own existing family. Thus despite the emphasis on familial relations and the tendering of Stay’s body as an element within the plot — the near possibility that she and her father would have had sex — the narrative is propelled through calculation of state services.

Indeed, the film seems to parody the importance of the body to Wardill’s would-be melodrama. Long sequences devoted to Stay and her father, separately, nude on screen, act as interludes in the narrative momentum and flout the melodramatic convention by which the revelation of the body leads to the revelation of identity or to a reversal of fortune; they mock even the idea of the body as semiotic — that is, as being anything but a body. Stay’s body is disenfranchised from its role in the narrative, and taking its place is the social regulatory framework that organises the lives of children and people deemed unfit to look after themselves. For while the erotic female body has traditionally been feared as a source of disruption to the social order, Wardill’s concern is with this social order’s attempt to regulate it — in effect, to strip a woman’s body of its affect and return it to the status of object.

Often in Wardill’s films, psychoanalysis — a discipline meant, originally, to liberate the body and the mind from repression — figures as an agent of this kind of regulation of bodies. The discipline provides her melodramas with plot lines — the Oedipal complex in Game Keepers, the return of the repressed in Full Firearms, the psychosocial disorder of the title character in Ben (2007) — but the films also suggest that therapy and, broadly, intellectual understanding of sexual desire provide blueprints that are used within discourses of power and regulation. This is often literalised in her films by therapy closing down options, acting as a means of alienation or furthering the object-like nature of her characters. Ben, for example, is based on the Freudian case study of a man who cannot connect to those around him; we never see him, but we hear his case notes read aloud, and see actors in strange costumes moving among objects such as modernist tables, trendy sneakers and fake flowers. It is difficult to make out exactly what is going on, but Ben, who works as a delivery man, is apparently being treated by a hypnotherapist, present via a male voice, while his notes are read aloud by a female voice. Ben’s response to his sexuality is, like Stay’s, practical — as the female voice states, ‘He meets his sexual needs. Matter-of-factual, he visits a prostitute on a regular basis.’

The language of the two voice-overs is that of science refracted through bureaucracy: note-taking, the tallying of data. An acute scene of trauma occurs in an episode when Ben fails to deliver a box to a customer, and instead hands it to someone on the street, saying, ‘This is a gift from God.’ To cure him the hypnotherapist attempts to make Ben believe he is the box he did not deliver, and then to pick himself up:
Characters are treated on equal footing with commodities in Game Keepers: all images have a forensic white background, disallowing any hierarchy between the objects comprising the mise en scène of the set, and the actors moving around within it. The Diamond (Descartes Daughter) (2008) tells of the automaton that Descartes purportedly made to replace his daughter, after she died as a young girl. When he loses this substitute — apocryphally, he took it with him by boat on a trip to advise the queen in Sweden, and the sailors, fearful about what it was, threw it overboard — it is a redoubled loss. Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck (2007) proposes an overlap between filmic articulation, in discrete chronological film frames, and stained glass windows of the Middle Ages, which served to educate a generally illiterate audience. The film plays with the shifting of characters from their stained glass representation to their ‘live’ acting on film, in costumes that are cartoonish approximations of mediaeval costume on the one hand and contemporary accessories on the other. The characters move awkwardly, as if they were static representations rather than moving bodies within a moving film. The ambiguity of the last image, of a man by turns thrusting (perhaps) and kicking and punching (definitely) the decal figure of a woman on the floor bears this confusion between real and representation out poignantly: how can he connect to her? Is he trying to sleep with her, or fight her? Is she dead, is he mourning? We know something of affective magnitude is at stake, but not what or why.

While confusion about identity is a hallmark of both tragedy and melodrama — Oedipus’s not knowing Jocasta is his mother; Edmond Dantès’s disguising himself as the Count of Monte Cristo; Sarah Jane’s being African-American, not white — the confusion of Wardill’s characters is of a different nature. It involves errors of category: is the woman at the end of Sick Serena a woman or a reproduction of a woman? Is Descartes’s daughter a girl or an automaton? Wardill’s films, operating in the register of the visual arts as much as of narrative fiction, bring a concern with self-reflexivity and the status of media and material to a field that has largely avoided these concerns. Is Game Keepers a film of objects or of images of objects? This is especially germane to the medium of 16mm film, which Wardill largely works in. Its materiality has been underlined in Structuralist film, an influence on Wardill, and its growing obsolescence has prompted an affective fascination with 16mm equipment. Indeed, a number of her film installations directly pick up the question of whether film is image or object. SEA OAK (2008), for example, emphasises the object-ness of projector and film stock, as well as the aural component of film. Lit under a spotlight, an imageless projector plays a voice recounting the conclusions of a California think tank that analysed the syntax of speeches made by Republican and Democratic politicians in the US, to suggest how Republican causes lend themselves to more persuasive expressions thereof.

‘Very slowly pick Ben up and bring him back here to me.’ Pushing this identification between body and object to a stymied extreme, the elliptical film ends with two dovetailing pieces of information: he did not walk over in a straight line to pick Ben up (given by the male voice) and he fears his organs are rotting inside him (given by the female). The study suggests not only the objecthood of Wardill’s characters, but also the idea that this status comes at the loss or even detriment of the body itself.

Rather than an ideal or a moral occult, Wardill emphasises media fixity as the missing guarantor in the world her films create — an objectness of objects, a pure visuality of projected images — and, extended through Guy Debord and others, an authenticity of social relationships, felt desire and desire unmediated and untransformed by language and institutionalised means of discourse. Her characters act out some wider alienation and ideological confusion stemming from, among other things, this regulation of human bodies as if they were objects. Similarly, her transferral of affect from the body to the object also forms part of the films’ critical message regarding a society of commodity fetishism, in which status is derived not from a code of ethics or behaviour but from possession and taste.

Another of her film installations, Split the View in Two Part II (2009), consists of a projector, a soundtrack and an anamorphic image projected on the wall. The sound component tells of a drug trial for the pharmaceutical company Parexel that two men volunteer for. In the course of the trial one of the participants’ bodies blows up like a balloon: he becomes, in effect, anamorphic. The image on the wall is of the two men, elongated beyond recognition. Again we are presented with an image/body, object/body elision, but the installation seems to be asking a wider and more profound question about the ways in which we know things. We want the soundtrack, which is hard to make out, to connect to the image, which it does, in a sense, but not in the plot-exposition way we want it to. And we want to be able to see the image — which, as an anamorphic image, we could even call the ‘very’ image of difficulty and obscuration — but when we walk over to view it from the side we are confronted with the very (sculptural) object of the projector in our path. Like signal interference, our means of understanding this conglomeration of visual, aural and haptic runs against itself — though, spurred on by a desire to fully apprehend the story, we want to join these ‘views’ back together. The relation between knowledge and desire is touched upon in the preface to the second edition of Henry James’s 1877 novel The American, published in 1908. In the text, James famously offers a definition of the romantic that might relate back to the tensions Wardill sets up between the two:

'The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in
the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know: the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.  

In the combination of dream state and clinical language that characterises Game Keepers, Ben, The Diamond or Sick Serena, Wardill both animates and repels the ‘beautiful circuit and subterfuge’ described by James. She reinstates it through an emphasis on aesthetic excess and a persistent obfuscation, and also clamps down on it, not allowing desire to signify but positing it as an object-commodity, a symptom of clinical repression or intellectual articulation. In Game Keepers/Without Game, Stay ultimately murders her father with an axe, but this event is not given a grandiloquent flourish; it rather participates in the principles of biénnesance (specifically the code that no violence should occur onstage) that the French Romantics, whose theatrical exploits helped to inaugurate the melodramatic genre, moved away from. The murder gives occasion for the first contact between objects, or in fact between people and objects, in the film — that is, the bathetic shock trades on rhetoric, style and a code internal to the film (‘objects do not touch’) that not all viewers might apprehend. The viewer’s ability to respond to this melodrama with emotion or empathy is radically curtailed throughout — the ‘beautiful’ circuit becomes at once intellectual, moving towards and against James’s synthesis of ‘our thought and our desire’.

Footnotes


2. Rem Koolhaas, in his response to Venturi’s presentation, asked if architecture, having now allowed these ‘things’ to be valid constituents of architecture’s scope (i.e. via Postmodernism), could now put them ‘back’ (i.e. into the popular culture from which they came). At which point an audience member accused him of anti-Americanism.


6. Wardill’s latest film, Full Firearms, concerns a woman who has amassed a large fortune from the arms trade. To assuage her guilt for the victims she thereby helped kill, she builds an enormous house for their orphans. However, even before it is completed, the house is taken over by squatters, whom she believes to be the ghosts of the people she has killed, come back to haunt her. She ultimately abandons the construction of the house, leaving it as a partial ruin, while her architect has a nervous breakdown.


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The Allegorical Impulse, Revisited: Emily Wardill, in Fragments by Dieter Roelstraete

It is true that the overbearing ostentation, with which the banal object seems to arise from the depths of allegory, is soon replaced by its disconsolate everyday countenance. — Walter Benjamin

It is not easy to make out, with absolute certainty, the title of the only book that offers something akin to a panoramic view of Emily Wardill’s work to date: at first glance, it looks like it is simply titled ‘We are behind’ — at least, that’s what both the cover (a view of four women ascending a staircase, seen from the back, ostensibly echoing Oskar Schlemmer’s famous Bauhaustreppe (Bauhaus Stairway) painting from 1932: we are behind them indeed) and the first page appear to be telling us. On the second page, however, in the same flowing, skewed font known colloquially as a ‘captcha’ — short for a ‘Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart’, or the challenge that is given on web pages to weed out spambots — this title continues, announcing: ‘We are behind the object.’ The object, to be sure, is a major issue in Wardill’s art. In a (sort of) introduction to the book, the artist informs us that

This is a lecture in seven parts. I am going to talk about the object. I am not just going to talk about it. I want to make us feel it, with our flesh. The seven parts are ordered under the following titles: 1 The Object 2 The Rational Mind and The Irrational Mind 3 The Diamond (Descartes Daughter) 4 The Daughter 5 The Irrational 6 The Irrational Daughter: Stay 7 The Persistent Object. […] In the first and last section objects are used to order content and they are the content. You’ll feel what I mean.2

To the right of this caveat, as a (sort of) frontispiece to the first chapter, a well-known image is the well-known cover of Led Zeppelin’s 1976 Presence album, made by UK underground rock design luminaries Hipgnosis: a photo-collage depicting a rather square-looking family (mom, dad, son, daughter) in front of a window through which a glimpse of an artificial marina can be caught, seated around a table on top of which a small, mysterious object is posited. The obvious reference is to the obelisk in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), and images of this enigmatic material ‘presence’ reappear on the frontispieces of all subsequent chapters: a photograph of a woman holding and stroking the obelisk amid a field of daffodils inaugurates chapter 3, a photograph of a doctor giving the obelisk to a baby precedes chapter 4, etc. — all of them Hipgnosis designs.

Throughout the, different objects are put under scrutiny; in the first chapter, it is a helmet. The text introduces the object: ‘the helmet shows that our body is less important than our head’ — and a picture of a helmet is dutifully inserted into the text. Appearing weight- and dimensionless and shot against a sterile white background, the image of the helmet presages a sequence of five production stills, reprinted in the middle of the book, from Wardill’s Game Keepers Without Game (2009):

The objects appearing in the aforementioned production stills (inserted into a chapter titled ‘The Persistent Object’) are: a packaged ice cream cone, an axe, a lighter, an apple and something that looks like an amulet or pendant. The same axe makes a dramatic reappearance at the end of Game Keepers Without Game, when it is seen lodged in the back of the male protagonist’s head. It is Dad’s head, crowned by a slowly expanding halo of dark red blood. In a conversation (of sorts) between Wardill and the book’s co-author, Ian White, Wardill tells us that

the axe in the head is a kind of sick joke. Dad gets killed by his own rusted object that he bought to cut firewood, which he never would because he buys it precut from the garage. He is killed by his own useless, useful-looking object. Stay, his daughter, is giving it a purpose by killing him.3

We who are, as the title of the book suggests (and its cover enacts), behind the object only see its back or ‘dark side’ — the capability of the axe to kill, as well as the absence of anything material in the projection of film, the medium that Wardill has chosen to call her own. What, after all, is behind that most spectral yet sensuous of objects called film?

Parenthesis: so objects are important in Wardill’s work — the object is a major ‘presence’ in many of her films and related projects, hipgnostic or not. They appear as key players, symbols of some-thing as much as things-in-and-for-themselves — a key distinction (or rather, blurring of distinctions) to which we will be returning shortly — not just in Game Keepers Without Game, but also, for instance, in The Diamond (Descartes Daughter) (2008), a loose-handed homage to half-a-dozen heist films in which a million-dollar diamond is protected by a dense web of lasers. Even when the object as such is not so palpably present, its language insinuates itself into the films’ narrative fabric: in Ben (2006), a film based in part on a textbook for psychoanalytic

Emily Wardill, Fulll Firearms, 2011, video projection, c.90min. Courtesy the artist
training, the object is invoked by the nameless therapist as the eponymous hero’s actual stand-in: ‘Now in a moment I’m going to ask you to open your eyes, and when you open your eyes you’ll be in an empty room. It’s totally empty, there’s nothing in there at all. On the other end of it, there’s an object called Ben. Go down. Pick Ben up very slowly, very slowly pick Ben up and bring him back here to me.’ (One could also add here that, if the acting in Game Keepers Without Game in particular can seem a tad wooden, it is doubtless because a ‘wooden’ acting style is what can reasonably be expected from people who have been turned into objects — one crucial ingredient, precisely, of the aesthetic register of the Freudian uncanny.) But in addition to the various objects in Wardill’s films, we must also note the artist’s emphasis on the film medium as an object or thing in its own right, or at least on the so-called film apparatus as a constellation of various discreet objects — and this is where the Structuralist film tradition as one particularly potent source of inspiration for Wardill comes into its own. SEA OAK (2008) is Wardill’s most programmatic ‘film’ in this respect: shown in a darkened space (naturally) in which the sole spotlight falls on a 16mm film projector, installed on a plinth, that is not playing the film whose soundtrack we are listening to. (Almost all of Wardill’s films are shot on 16mm.) This soundtrack consists of fragments from interviews conducted by researchers at the Rockridge Institute, formerly a left-wing think tank in Berkeley, dedicated to the study of how certain rhetorical figures are or have been used in Republican discourse. A noticeable mournful quality familiar to most viewers of Structuralist film permeates the installation: a discourse. A noticeable mournful quality familiar to most viewers of Structuralist film permeates the installation: a discourse. A noticeable mournful quality familiar to most viewers of Structuralist film permeates the installation: a discourse. A noticeable mournful quality familiar to most viewers of Structuralist film permeates the installation: a discourse.

A daughter (this one called Stay, a psychotic young girl put up for adoption at age eight) killing her father (a 40-year-old writer consumed by guilt, scheming to readopt his estranged daughter): not just a Freudian trope, but a thoroughly melodramatic motif as well — and through her own articulate references to the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Douglas Sirk, Wardill has ensured that the concept of melodrama has been a recurring presence in discussions of her work. Game Keepers Without Game, however, is based on a literary source that, at first sight, appears to have very little to do with melodrama’s ‘minoritarian’ history (in the Deleuzian sense of the word) — Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s Life Is a Dream (La Vida es Sueño) from 1635 to 1636, one of the high-water marks of Spanish Baroque literature.8

Like many cultural artefacts of the Spanish Baroque — think of the oppressively dark palette favoured by Francisco de Zurbarán, or of the praise heaped upon a writer like Baltasar Gracián by later pessimists like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche — Life Is a Dream is not a terribly uplifting affair, and Calderón’s gloomy vision of the human condition is best expressed in the famous verses exclaimed towards the end of act two that gave the play its title: ‘I dream that I am here / of these imprisonments charged, / and I dreamed that in another state / happier I saw myself. / What is life? A frenzy. / What is life? An illusion. / A shadow, a fiction. / And the greatest profit is small; / For all of life is a dream, / And dreams, are nothing but dreams.’ (In keeping with the spirit of an earlier analysis, we could also ad lib here that ‘life is but a movie’.) This pervasive hypochondria, a straightforward function of the play’s setting in war-torn seventeenth-century Europe, is constitutive of the play’s exemplary status as the last word in allegory. For as Walter Benjamin put it in his seminal study on the origins of German tragic drama (whose long-forgotten authors were the lesser contemporaries of Calderón de la Barca, whom he refers to throughout the book), ‘the heart of the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’ is located in ‘the baroque, the allegorical way of seeing’. This philosophical emphasis on decline is doubtless one of the reasons why the allegorists of the early seventeenth century, and the Baroque as an artistic paradigm in its totality, were so enchanted by the spectacle of ruination. The ruin, as a metaphor of inexorable decline and as the symbol of nature’s inevitable triumph over all that is man-made, was one of the great pictorial obsessions of the arts of the time, and allegory was the literary form par excellence by way of which this proto-romantic fascination could be cast into a philosophical rumination: ‘allegories [were], in the realm of thoughts, what ruins [were] in the realm of things. This explains the Baroque cult of the ruin.’ And doesn’t she who says ‘ruin’ also say ‘fragment’? Without a doubt, the Baroque is above all an art of fragments, a self-satisfied account of the eventual ruin of all attempts at totalisation (such as were undertaken in the Renaissance still), and this, clearly, is what draws Benjamin, the quintessential philosopher of fragments, to the decidedly arcane realm of (German) Baroque literature in the first place: in it, ‘the false appearance of totality is extinguished [...] A deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art [...] emerges as a reaction to its self-confidence at the time of the Renaissance’. Consequently, ‘that which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in Baroque creation’; it has also been, for quite some time now (and for reasons that are well known), the finest material in a significant share of contemporary artistic creation — which is probably the...

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2. A Rumination on Ruination

The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging, since it was not the mere whole as its obviously constructed quality that was the principal impression that was aimed at.

— Walter Benjamin

Emily Wardill, Game Keepers Without Game, 2009, video projection with 5.1 sound, 72min, production still. Photographs: Polly Braden. Courtesy the artist
reason why the two-way experience of fragmentation (i.e. depicting a shattered, fragmented world by way, often quite literally, of fragments — objects) that is such a defining feature of much of Wardill’s work appears to speak to us with the authority of a true exemplum: it exemplifies contemporary experience as such. In short: hers is an eminently allegorical art.

3. Image/Text, Text/Book

Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterised as a world in which the detail is of no great importance.13 — Walter Benjamin

Experiencing any of Emily Wardill’s films means subjecting oneself to disturbances, disjunctions, discords, discontinuities and many more words that start with dis- (a prefix first used in extenso, no doubt, during the Baroque). In many of her works, these various techniques of distancing and de-familiarisation are enacted on the aural plane first and foremost: in disjointed drum patterns (Basking in what feels like ‘an ocean of grace’, I soon realise that I’m not looking at it, but rather that I AM it, recognising myself, 2006, and Game Keepers Without Game); sudden bursts of church bell ringing (Born Winged Animals and Honey Gatherers of the Soul, 2006) or choir singing (Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck, 2007); halting, almost robotic English-language voice-overs, preferably read by non-native speakers (Ben and The Diamond (Descartes Daughter)). This occasionally dizzying insistence on rhythmic asymmetries of all kinds — meant to complement the stutter that much of the images likewise appear to suffer from — may cause some annoyance in the maiden viewing of any of the aforementioned works, as it should. And it’s not just because of the soundtrack that I have asked myself, midway through all of the above films, almost half indignant, how to make sense of it all: bewildement and befuddledness are elemental ingredients of the WardillViewing experience. The sources are obscure, sometimes obscure in the extreme, the references widely scattered, the language opaque in the way language isn’t supposed to be, the acting ‘weird’ (I never thought I would use this word in the context of art criticism, but there you go). The question is often not so much ‘what is it about?’ as it is — and I have made recourse to it on a number of occasions in this very essay — ‘what is it based on?’ (From which overgrown ruin are these various fragments taken?) And the answer is very often simply something I don’t know. In any case, the allegorist speaks of one thing, but means the other (allo = other + agoreuei = speaking), inevitably making the question as to what he or she means sound naïve, if not intolerably vulgar: after all, any person, any object, any relationship can ‘mean’ absolutely anything else.

Footnotes


Franklin Melendez, in turn, observes how ‘throughout the film, objects are allotted monumental weight — perhaps as much as the characters themselves — whether it is a Nintendo Wii, a limited edition pair of Nike’s or a designer teapot’. See F. Melendez, ‘Emily Wardill’s Game Keepers Without Game’, Artslant, 12 April 2010, http://www.artslant.com/sf/articles/show/15521 (all last accessed on 11 July 2011). Melendez compares the film’s aesthetic to something like ‘Lars Von Trier’s Dogville re-staged in a high-end Idea’. Finally, in the aforementioned conversation with Sperling, Wardill remarks on the protagonist’s struggle with this opaque, semi-hostile object-world: ‘when she comes back into the home she doesn’t understand the objects the house is full of, which are built up as status symbols but then have the status of props and finally of evidence’.

6. The most authoritative definition of the uncanny remains that proposed by Sigmund Freud in his classic 1919 essay ‘Das Unheimliche’, in which he refers to the preparatory research undertaken by Ernst Jentsch: the feeling of the uncanny is related to ‘doubts as to whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate.’ S. Freud, The Penguin Freud Library Vol.14: Art and Literature (trans. James Strachey), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, p.347. This wilful doubt is an integral component of the aesthetic strategies deployed in Game Keepers Without Game (see also note 4); in her review of Wardill’s film, Gabrielle Hoad has noted that ‘the status of real people and inanimate objects is blurred from the start — both seem to be commodities, both capable of communication. An object might speak of its owner’s class, wealth, taste — or even their paranoid state of mind. A person might be possessed, exploited or discarded.’ See G. Hoad, ‘Emily Wardill: Game Keepers Without Game’, a-n Magazine, 29 March 2010, http://www.a-n.co.uk/interface/reviews/single/617966 (last accessed on 12 July 2011).


8. How is Game Keepers Without Game ‘based’ on Life Is a Dream? In the former, in Wardill’s own words, the narrative ‘traces the difficult return of a child who has been banished from the family home’ (E. Wardill and I. White, We are behind, op. cit., p.150); in the latter, the king of Poland has his son imprisoned after it is prophesised that the psychotic prince, should he be allowed to roam freely, will cast the country into catastrophic chaos — which he does, once his remorseful father allows him home.


11. Ibid., p.178. Other commentators have noted that the publication of Calderón’s masterpiece well-nigh coincided with that of Descartes’s Discourse on Method (1637), the ghost of which also animates The Diamond (Descartes Daughter). Certainly, in positing a hyperbolic doubt as the archè of all philosophy, Descartes revealed himself to be a quintessentially Baroque thinker.

12. Ibid., p.176.

13. Ibid., p.175.
