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Creators	Gronlund, Melissa

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Previous spread
and left:
Emily Wardill,
*Game Keepers Without
Game*, 2009, video
projection with
5.1 sound, 72min,
production still.
Photograph:
Polly Braden.
Courtesy the artist

Circuits and Subterfuge: Emily Wardill and the Body Imaginary

— 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'.¹ 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

*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-Monerau, the third, a Stephenson locomotive...*³

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 'Italianness', 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

Melissa Gronlund sees in Emily Wardill's adaption of melodrama an investigation of the regulation of bodies, desire and modes of knowing.

into a non-analytic mode of expression in the midst of exalted proceedings.² 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 protagonists, 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

1 Robert Venturi, 'A Disorderly Ode to an Architecture for Now', at 'In Your Face', organised by *Metropolis* at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York, 29 September 2001. An expanded version of the talk and images is available at http://www.metropolismag.com/html/vsba/robert_venturi.html (last accessed on 14 July 2014).

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.

3 Georges Perec, *Les Choses: Une Histoire des Années Soixantes*, Paris: Julliard, 1997, p.9. Translation the author's.

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).⁴ 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 transcendental 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 Percec’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/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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.’⁷ The legibility of the body within melodrama is akin to its legibility within Freud’s method



Emily Wardill, *Full Firearms*, 2011, video projection, c.90min. Courtesy the artist

Overleaf: *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck*, 2007, 16mm film, 12min, production still. Photograph: the artist. Courtesy the artist

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 Cécilie M.’s cheek was related to a ‘slap on the face’ given to her by her husband.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 for 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 *outrage* 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

4 See Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’ (1972), in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, London: British Film Institute, 1987, and Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. The term ‘melodrama’ and its reception (of the term as much as the genre) is highly fraught within film studies, with both feminist critiques of Elsaesser’s essay (notably by Laura Mulvey and Barbara Creed) and a critique of the characterisation of the category and its uniqueness (notably by Steven Neale). Many of the essays contributing to this debate are reproduced in Gledhill’s *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, *op. cit.* See also John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*, London: Wallflower Press, 2004, p.20ff.

5 See Charles Bernstein, ‘My/My/My’, in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (ed.), *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014, pp.93–104.

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.

7 P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p.201.

8 P. Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993, p.226. Quoted from Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings of Sigmund Freud*, vol.2, London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74, p.152.

9 P. Brooks, *Body Work*, *op. cit.*, pp.21–25.





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

Emily Wardill, *Ben*, 2006, 16mm film, 10min. Courtesy the artist



Emily Wardill, *Ben*, 2006, 16mm film, 10min. Courtesy the artist

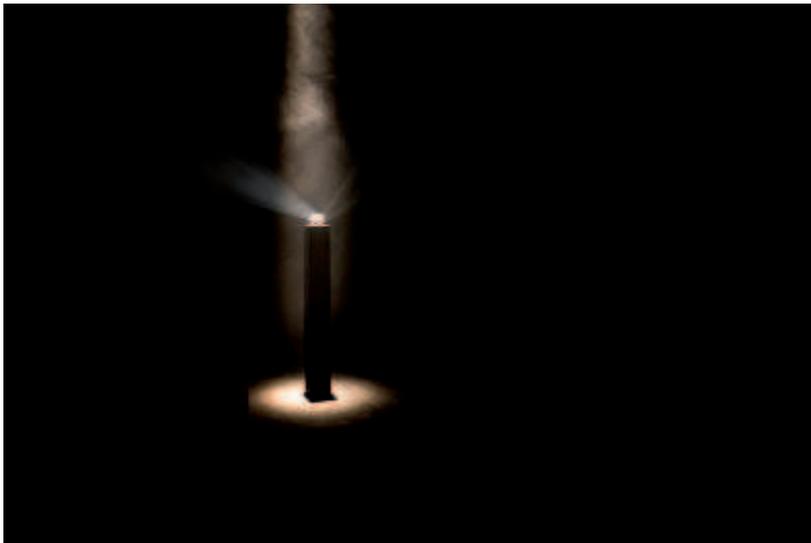
him; we never see him, but we hear his case notes read aloud, and see actors in strange costumes moving among objects such as modernist tables, trendy sneakers and fake flowers. It is difficult to make out exactly what is going on, but Ben, who works as a delivery man, is apparently being treated by 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

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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 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: ‘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.

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 setting 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 *Gamekeepers* 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-hood 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

Emily Wardill,
The Diamond
(*Descartes Daughter*),
2008, 16mm film
installation, 10min.
Photograph:
Polly Braden.
Courtesy the artist

themselves to more persuasive expressions thereof.

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, social feeling 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 obscurity — 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.¹⁰

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 *bienséance* (specifically the coda 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'.

¹⁰ Henry James, preface to *The American*, second edition. Available at <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/prefaces/text14.htm> (last accessed on 15 August 2011). Brooks identifies James in *The Melodramatic Imagination* as one of his melodramatists, a revisionist reading of the arch-realist writer.