

SICK SERENA AND DREGS AND WRECK AND WRECK

Wardill makes films, it seems, with instinctual talent, and the opacity of her work is both a measure of this and an inquiry into the degree to which we are conscious of our own behavior – into how reality rubs against expectation.

Melissa Gronlund, Frieze

Broken Windows Ian White

Illusion is visual fiction. The eighteenth century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge employed a thought he had while experiencing theatre to coin a phrase that describes both the Romantic imagination and also what illusion asks of us: the suspension of disbelief. The literally dark theatre auditorium becomes a metaphorical, portable darkness that descends onto all readers, into which all viewers might be plunged: to forget where we are, to forget who we are, to believe in the impossible, be outside of time, outside of the place we are actually in, outside of ourselves, to be convinced, transported by illusion.

Many darkneses descend in Emily Wardill's films that are sometimes actual and sometimes metaphorical; a black screen, dark clouds, muddy water, an empty nightclub, private ritual, a sense of unknowing but they do not ask us to suspend disbelief. At the same time as breaking narrative conventions her films do not entirely break illusions, but play these conventions back onto illusions into a new order that defies commentary. Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck revels in a subset of fiction – allegory, with its roots in medieval poetry – that ricochets retrospectively into her other films, into us watching them, into a methodology or a thought process being made manifest in which we are complicit.

Allegory is an illusion of the highest order, fiction crystallised into a specific or mysterious instructional purpose. It tells two entirely co-dependent stories absolutely simultaneously, one which we are actually reading, the other the lesson to be derived from it. Through coherent, albeit often surreal narrative, we are taught something about how to behave, we are told our own story.

These (invariably moral) coda only make sense if the narrative we are reading or watching remains intact. Allegories are told like fairytales or made into pictures that have a similar symbolic order. Religious images are not strictly allegorical, but they are instructional and in the close-ups of Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck's stained glass the figures crunched between thick lead with animals and angels, are reframed as decapitated, broken; they

are reinterpreted as mysteriously, dramatically symbolic. What is more they come to life. To 'life', they come to whose life?

An excessively bearded man reads the Yellow Pages, he wears an adidas tracksuit. The giant shadow of an oscillating electric fan is thrown onto a red wall. These dramatisations are a game of unravelling meaning, of visual and aural broken allegories. If they are symbolic then these things signify modern life, turning the constructed set into an absurd collapse of interior and exterior space, a psychological fabrication. Characters become photographs in a confusion of representations that is deliberately beguiling and as incongruous and hysterical as the response to the child's question "What are you thinking about?": "A giant bollock that could be used as a spacehopper." But at the same time this narrative and its coda that struggles into and out of sense is punctuated by things – the telephone directory, office furniture – as if they symbolise nothing, but are instead a sharp reality, like the irrevocably, shockingly actual scrap of a newspaper stuck to the painted slice of table on the canvas of an analytical Cubist painting. Belief is not suspended but depicted and rebounded.

Allegory is the conjunction of an image and how we read it, but if Cubism has a textual equivalent other than writing that tries to explain it then it is found in the work of Gertrude Stein. The first entry under 'Objects' in her book Tender Buttons describes 'A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS'. Stein's equivalent, non-explanatory text and its relation to painting (to Cubism), its uncompromisingly compressed shards of thought and image, may be closer to describing our relation to Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck than the standard rationalisms of art writing:

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading

Let the emancipatory malevolence of that last sentence be this (our) story's coda.

Emily Wardill's films are like the traps of complex sentence structures that she sometimes employs as their titles; Born Winged Animals and Honey Gatherers of the Soul (2005), Basking in what feels like an 'Ocean of Grace' I soon realise that I'm not looking at it, but rather am it, recognising myself (2006). They are sentences that suggest resolutely private generative relations – a filmic translation of Freidrich Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality – deployed into broken image-systems of isolation, aspiration, modernity, snatched observations slipping in and out of the frame, defying documentary practice, perverse symbolic orders set to darkness and the clarion call of sometimes distorted church bells; the focus group as a/our mirror, the model for a perfectly symmetrical soundtrack, speaking subjects kept in silence. These films evoke the territory of an unfathomable, discreet paranoia that in Ben (2007) is split into the explicitly psychological. A spoken case study alternates with the subject's/our hypnosis, one or both of which is/are played out on a set near collapse, a set of home-made baroque decoration, excessive, extraordinary costume, an imagining into existence of stained glass and the Blind Glass of Gertrude Stein.

What these works have in common is us, as viewers and readers, caught in the interplay between image and illusion, between resolution and confusion, confidence and a radical unknowing. Alone in a portable darkness Wardill's dynamic of interpretation asks us not to forget where we are and acutely denies our separation from that which we experience. We unravel these mysterious instructions at our peril. The difference is spreading.

Emily Wardill

Emily Wardill's practice is a consistent investigation into the points at which objects becomes signs and how that closure might be re-animated.

Her films have been shown at Tate Britain, London; Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Kinomuseum at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, Germany; PS1, New York and Witte de With, Rotterdam.

She is a Senior Lecturer at Central St Martins, London, and co-organises the yearly event Itchy Park. Emily Wardill is represented by Fortescue Avenue, London and her films are distributed by LUX.

Ian White

Ian White is Adjunct Film Curator for Whitechapel Gallery, London. He is an independent curator and writer and has contributed to Art Review, Art Monthly, The Wire, frieze and other publications. He was the co-ordinator of The Artists Cinema (2005/6) at the Frieze Art Fair. Consultancy includes a project for Arts Council England into artists' film and video works in collections and archives. As an artist his most recent project was a collaboration with Jimmy Robert for Art Now at Tate Britain (2004) with whom he is currently developing a new work to be performed at STUK, Belgium and De Appel, Amsterdam (2007/8).