

An Arte-Factual Tale: *Diorama* (2016) by Emma Finn

by Louise S. Milne

Emma Finn's *Diorama* is a story about the secret life of artefacts, in every sense of the word. First, the title on black appears with an ominous chord. Something spooky is expected. The film opens on a lab-coated young woman, wheeling a large wrapped object through the corridors of some kind of museum. It is human-sized and stiff, seen first from the back, and never completely in shot. The woman knocks at a door and rolls the thing inside, a young man, also in a white coat, lifts it up and out; it rests briefly, framed against an institutional wall. Next, an animated text message dialogue, in orange and purple bubbles, beeping as they appear: *Where did you find it?... In the storeroom...It's defunct...Is it usable?... So the two have names – Amy and Andrew – they are friends as well as colleagues, and they have a project, involving the muffled object. These three are the protagonists of *Diorama*.*

The film cuts to a snowy ground, seen from above, marked by three trails of footsteps. A strange figure in orange and black enters from the top of the frame, its steps marked by xylophone strokes. It carries a fishing rod, and leaves no footprints. It bends to peer up at us: a white face in a padded orange hood; a paper strip with marker pen eyebrows and dots for eyes; a black cloak edged with white Xs; A sequence of shots shows the figure from back and profile, superimposed over B&W panoramic photographs of snowy mountainous landscapes. With its homemade costume and low-fi photoshopped relation to its setting, this character has a dreamlike retro quality, evocative of children's TV; a feeling enhanced by its xylophone *leitmotif*. The costume evokes childhood itself and childhood impressions of Eskimos or Inuits. The landscapes – actually shot in Banff, Canada – are “real” in the sense that a photograph is taken to be; Orange Hood is “real” in that s/he is evidently a human actor. And the technological superimposition of the two is clear: the figure has been placed – trapped? – into this photographic mise-en-scene. Its gaze into the camera seems to acknowledge this.

The figure walks on through the backdrop landscape – it finds a 3D “cartoon” artificial rock (unglazed white porcelain, outlined in marker-pen) – picks it up – and smiles. Cut to the basement of the museum, where the (“defunct”) object is being unwrapped; now we see it as pieces of a battered mannequin. The woman seriously measures and examines it, then fits it with a replacement plaster hand.

The text bubbles return to provide more backstory: *this will be a fluffy piece... An April Fool piece... Damn autocorrect, I mean a fluff piece...* The dialogue refers to a fish – an April Fool fish? – which is also *fluffy*; apparently a fake kept in the museum collections, periodically the focus of public interest. We haven't seen the fish yet, but recall that Orange Hood is equipped with fishing rod, and newly found stone. Cut back to the traveller, who walks on, impossibly frictionless, over a chasm in the snow; stops at a black circle – a hole in the ice – and holds up a black fishing line; a black horizontal for our inspection.

artefact (ˈoːnfækt), *sb.* and *a.* Also **arti-**. [f. L. *arte*, abl. of *ars* art + *factum*, neut. pa. pple. of *facere* to make. (Cf. Sp., Pg. *artefacto*, It. *artefatto* adj. and sb.)]

A. *sb.* Anything made by human art and workmanship; an artificial product. In *Archaeol.* applied to the rude products of aboriginal workmanship as distinguished from natural remains.

B. a product or effect that is not present in the natural state (of an organism, etc.) but occurs during or as a result of investigation or is brought about by some extraneous agency.

1644 K. DIGBY *Two Treat.* II. viii. 411 If we reflect vpon the workes and artes of men, [a] good life, a commonwealth, an army, a house, a garden, all artefactes; what are they, but compositions of well ordered partes?

1884 G. S. HALL *Diestemey's Teaching Hist.* 8 School artifacts, mistaken for perplexities inherent in the subject itself.

1922 *Class. Q.* XVI. 24 The shadows seem to be real till their originals are exposed as the paltry artefacts they are.

Diorama presents three different realities or dimensions: 1) the young woman and man of the museum, with the mannequin they unearth and refurbish, for a project involving the fish; 2) the couple's conversations by text in the digital ether (orange/purple on black), revealing in a fragmented way both their comic intent and the history of the fake fish; 3) the ethnographic/childlike personage in the green-screen dreamworld. We could understand the traveller in the snow-world as a preview of how the curators imagine their finished work. At the same time, s/he appears also to be an alter-ego of the mannequin, catapulted into an artificial world, destined to play a part in the "piece" under construction. When the traveller finally catches something from his/her flat black paper hole, it is indeed an impossible furry fish: represented as another kind of replica, not a porcelain or paper cartoon, but a soft toy. S/he regards it in perplexity, looking from fake fish to fake stone, and back to the camera.

Then Finn appears to resolve matters by bringing us behind the scenes: we see the set, in deep blue light, and the restored mannequin at full-length, in the Orange Hood costume, posed on fake snow, before a screen, on which is backprojected the snowy mountains. Andrew tinkers with equipment and taps on a keyboard, evidently working to bring together these elements (though we have already seen them combined) into the diorama of the title. A closeup reveals the mannequin's face, its features drawn like the Orange Hood, but this face is only plaster. A computer screen fills the frame, with a program trying to boot. There is a final text interchange, *Did it not work? Was it the screen?* And the last shot is given to the world of the traveller, seen at a distance, sitting in the snow, holding the fish.

The whole work, from one point of view, is a meditation on the nature of the artefactual, in its three main senses. The mannequin is in the museum basement because, we guess, it dates from the discarded curatorial repertoire of dioramas, once used as 3D ethnographic or archaeological illustrations. Such dioramas might once have displayed the "everyday life" of an Inuit or First Nation village as a frozen spectacle, enfolded in layers of distance and ideology. Contemporary curators try to reboot and reinvent the diorama medium with video and recorded sound; this seems to be what our young curators are up to. Hence the white Xs on the black costume; a technique used since the time of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadward Muybridge – pioneers of the moving image – as a means of motion capture; the mapping of a fictional costume/body/persona on to the movements of a real actor.

Equally, the pointed and beautiful artifice of the world of the traveller – a floating film image, leaving no mark on its photo-landscape – announces itself as green-screen, the product of software, and so artefactual. The film holds open the possibility that the traveller might be another kind of artefact: an uncanny and magical side-effect of resurrecting the mannequin and envisaging its animation. In the time of the film, the fictional comic micro-narrative Amy and Andrew plan – a hunt for the furry fish – comes into being immediately as if in a parallel reality: their creature is alive and wandering around in its flat world before they finish making him/her.

B. adj. Made by human art and workmanship. *rare*.

1909 J. A. STEWART *Plato's Doctr. Ideas* 179 The rêverie-image of an object natural or artefact.

b. *Archaeol.* An excavated object that shows characteristic signs of human workmanship or use.

1934 TOYNBEE *Stud. Hist.* III. iii. 156 It is a mere accident that the material tools which Man has made for himself should have a greater capacity to survive than Man's psychic artif[a]cts.

1979 *Encounter* Oct. 59/2 Other artifactual fields of endeavour have in the past been made to play this false role of an all-seeing mirror to man, [with] clothes, ornaments and sculpture.

1966 T. LEARY *Politics of Ecstasy* xi. 170 I'll teach them how to live as an animal and as a creature of nature... before I will force artifactual symbols... on their 2-billion-year-old cellular machineries.

Consider the role of the fish, central to the three narratives, though represented only in two (the text dialogue and the Orange Hood world). It represents also several senses of “artefact.” The two humans debate in texts its history as a questionable spectacular object, part of the museum’s inherited detritus (like the mannequin). Materially, it is a fabricated creature. Like the famous Fiji Mermaid of Barnum’s Circus, the furry fish is a natural history hoax, born of the same passion for taxidermy and taxonomy that fuelled the rise of the museums in the 19C, together with their new medium of diorama. So it is literally a cultural artefact, and a kind of spin-off (artefactual in the scientific sense) of the discipline of natural history itself. Immaterially, the fish is a modern mythical animal, on a par with the unicorn or the Loch Ness Monster. It can thus signify liminality and the occult dimension in the usual way. But its mythic power to generate narrative is expressed in terms of contemporary popular culture, as a discourse of scandal and fraud.

And, in the film-within-the-film of Finn’s *Diorama*, the furry fish is an artefact in the gaming sense: it is the magical object of Orange Hood’s quest. When the traveller catches it, s/he can’t decide whether to kill it or not. Better yet, in the final shot of the film, Orange Hood sits at a distance, clutching the furry fish, as if possession of it has cut the technological strings intended to bind this personage and its flat snow-world to the diorama.

This brings us to another connotation of the artefactual – to do with the experience of technology as error prone. The final words of the film are: *Did it not work? Was it the screen?* The sense of artefact as glitch is carefully woven throughout, leading to the (anti-)climax of the curators’ narrative. It is cued, for instance, in the text dialogue about the fish, with the reference to automated word recognition mistakes, in flashes of light on the mannequin’s head as Amy restores it, and in the glimpses of pixellated backlit screen (again around the head) as Andrew works with the diorama set. But the main “glitching” around which the film revolves is focussed on issues of animation and artefactual structure, in and through the visual qualities of the green-screen strand.

Special effects in cinema represent a paradoxical kind of artefactual experience: a glitch, so to speak, in the flow of suspended disbelief identified by Jean-Louis Baudry as the Basic Cinematic Apparatus. Each generation of SFX – used to make the impossible seem real – is in fact visible as fabrication in the moment of its reception. Recognising the scene as impossible, the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to the question of how it was made, and the presence of a crew of artificers, hidden behind the screen, leaps into palpable awareness. The visibility of the green-screen process in Orange Hood’s snow world is on one level a brilliantly executed special effect, and on another deliberately amateurish: an exposure of the known limits of Photoshop and CGI as fabrications. The film gives us candidates (Amy and Andrew) for the personae of the hidden puppeteers, yet, by their own account, they cannot make their video diorama work as they want it to.

c. In fantasy role-playing games, computer games, etc.: an object which may be found or collected by a player, typically conferring an advantage in the game.

1978 G. GYGAX *Eldritch Wizardry* (new ed.) 40 The abilities of all artifacts and relics must be determined by trial and error, by the players

2006 *N.Y. Times* (Electronic ed.) 29 June c12 You will stop just as soon as your troops cross a guarded bridge, occupy a castle or find a magical artifact

1973 *Nature* 21/28 Dec. 511/1 Extreme care must be taken when using spatial filtering methods to improve the quality of very noisy images, or an artefactual structure defined by the spatial filter may be generated in the reconstructed image.

glitch, n. Brit. /glɪtʃ/, U.S. /glɪtʃ/ Etymology: unknown. Slang. a. A surge of current or a spurious electrical signal; also, in extended use, a sudden short-lived irregularity in behaviour.

1969 *Daily Tel.* 15 Nov. 1/3 [Apollo moon flight] Thinking back to when we had our big glitch, I remember seeing it get light outside the window after we were in the clouds, and I’m pretty sure we got hit by lightning.

So why, in that case, do we see it, when they cannot? The banal response is, of course, that the film-maker is the real puppeteer. But *Diorama* is constructed to offer more intriguing aesthetic answers: its green-screen world is genuinely uncanny as well as comic, precisely because its artefactual nature is explicit. As Rosa Menkman explains, the power of glitch is about the failure of the medium to disappear; glitches reveal the existence and artificial nature of the carrying system.

Green-screen is the video equivalent of mid-20C rear projection; it involves the double registration of cinematic time, which the viewer cannot help but perceive as discontinuous. Formally, *Diorama* focuses this recognition in its several registrations of time and doubling: the realist level of the museum workrooms, the visual and sonic interfaces of phone and computer screens, the shared subculture of the furry fish legend, the set of the diorama, the unreal photo-natural world of Orange Hood.

Diorama is thus a fable about past and present concepts of media and mise-en-scène, wherein the turn-of-the-century diorama is revived as a retro joke, by two people conversing in screen captures. And it is also a kind of modern fairytale – a cautionary tale – an arte-factual tale – about a doll which comes to life, two would-be magicians, and a magic fish.

All quotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Other references: Jean-Louis Baudry & Alan Williams, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28(2), 1974-75: 39-47; Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, Network Notebooks 04 (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011).

1969 *Funk & Wagnalls Dict. Electronics* 70 Glitch, a stray current or signal [that] interferes in some way with the functioning of a system

dio'ramist n. a proprietor or exhibitor of a diorama.

1834 T. HOOD *Tylney Hall* (1840) 246 Here an indignant dioramist raves at a boggling scene-shifter.

1872 ‘G. ELIOT’ *Middlemarch* III. v. liii. 173 The memory has as many moods as the temper, and shifts its scenery like a diorama.