

CHIARA SIMONIGH

AROUND AND ABOUT THE LOOK:Samuel Beckett's *Film*

To my late, lamented friend and colleague Stefano Bajma Griga, a fine knower of Beckett and a profoundly Beckettian spirit.

From April 5th to May 22th 1963, Samuel Beckett worked on his screenplay for *Film*,¹ as can be gathered from a notebook housed at the Beckett Archive at the University of Reading. The work was originally meant to be part of a trilogy (never completed) by Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. Beckett asked the American stage director Alan Schneider to direct the film and Buster Keaton to play its leading role. Schneider accepted even though he had never before worked in cinema.

The title, *Film*, immediately reveals that it is a kind of statement of poetics or style, where Beckett typically juxtaposes the simplest of life's experiences with the most absolute of its questions. Beckett did not want to present a film to the public, but rather an *exemplum* of a film as part of his meta-discourse and meta-art that characterize his poetics and his style.

As a matter of fact, *Film* is probably one of the most remarkable results of Beckett's research into dramatic form as an expression of the human condition in late modernity. (Brater 1986, 3-12; Cascetta 2000; Bajma Griga 2001) Such a radical kind of research probes the essence of dramatization and questions the status of the performance and the act of looking. (Ferri 2012, 189-215; Serpieri 1996, 733-763) It challenges the notions of subjectivity and consciousness, which were at a historical crisis point. (Cohn 1965; Lamont 1970; Beja, Gontarski, Astier 1983).

Film is a piece of research that fits well the definition of what Martin Esslin termed a "visual lyric" (Esslin 1987, 35-49) – i.e. a work that aspires to that iconographic ideal of contemporary drama, something that Beckett gave life to as he was working on *Film*, an ideal that embraces theater, television and cinema. About a year before *Film*, the disembodied head in *Happy Days* and the urns and reflectors in *Play* are the means that, over a short span of time, conduct this investigation to the limits of representation and

¹ *Film*, directed by: Alan Schneider; Writing: Samuel Beckett; Cast: Buster Keaton, Nell Harrison, James Karen, Susan Reed; Cinematography by: Boris Kaufman; Film Editing by: Sidney Meyers; Art Direction by: Burr Smidt; Running time 24 minutes; Country: United States, 1965.

drama. In Beckett's *dramaticules*, furthermore, the mouth in *Not I* and the face in *That Time* shine out of the darkness and are made visible through a kind of lighting that seems to mimic a cinematic or television close-up. In his television drama, *Eh Joe*, the television camera comes so close to a face that the spectator may feel that he is entering the character's mind. (McMillan 1986 38-44; Mucci 1997, 431-439)

Such an elision of the forms of representation and drama coincides with an essential abstraction that is capable of giving new opportunities to experience in the era of the destruction of experience and capable of plumbing the depths of the human in the era of the crisis of humanity of the human being. All of this is also present in *Film*, a work without shapes of colors, sounds, noises, or words.²

The sole protagonist is faceless and is filmed constantly from behind. First, he runs along a wall and encounters a man and a woman who are horrified when they see him. Then, he goes up the stairs of a building and encounters an old woman who, when she looks at him, is astonished. Then, he enters a room, closes the curtains of a window, and covers a mirror with a drape. He looks at an unframed picture on the wall of a bearded man with prominent eyes (perhaps a god of classical antiquity) and rips it up. He looks at and chases a dog and a cat out of the room. He looks at a parrot in a cage and a goldfish in a glass tank and covers them with a drape. Finally, he sits down in a rocking chair and looks at some photos that picture him at significant moments in his life. Then he drowns off. Suddenly, he wakes up and feels that he is being observed. He covers his face, which is finally revealed to the spectator for an instant. His face appears with its left eye covered with a patch. Then he drowns off again until he wakes up again with a start and sees the person who is looking at him in front of him – that is, he sees himself. Finally, he closes his eyes and the image blackens out.

In the *Film* screenplay, Beckett gives unusually minute directions about the movements of the actor and camera. Naturally, the direction of the camera-movement is the novelty that does not appear in stage dramas.³ (Foucré 1970; Dort 347-359; Kalb 1989, 21-37; Puliani and Forlani 2006) The great cinematographer Boris Kaufman, the brother of Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) was chosen to handle the camera.

² At first, Beckett had conceived of *Film* as a filmic work whose sound track was to include noises and music from Franz Schubert's *Doppelgänger* (Atik 2007, 25-26).

³ In regard to this, it is interesting enough to read what Alan Schneider had to say: "I [...] decided that my early academic training in physics and geometry was finally going to pay off in my directorial career. Came then almost a year of preparation. Reading and rereading the "script," which, of course, had no dialogue (with the exception of that one whispered "sssh!"); asking Sam a thousand questions [...]; trying to visualize graphically and specifically the varied demands of those six tantalizing pages. Gradually, the mysteries and enigmas, common denominators of all new Beckett works, came into focus with fascinatingly simple clarity. The audacity of his concept—a highly disciplined use of two specific camera viewpoints—emerged from behind all the seeming ambiguities of the technical explanations. [...] I began to work out a tentative shooting script." (Schneider A. 1969, 123-124).

For most of the film, the protagonist is perceived by a camera that is constantly positioned directly behind his back. However, when the angle between the protagonist and the camera is less than 45°, it is as if the man notices it and shows his anguish by stopping any movement he is making. Specifically, the relationship between the protagonist and the camera goes through three distinct phases. In the first part of the film, which takes place in the street and on the stairs, the angle is less than 45° and it is as if the protagonist were not aware of being perceived while he is moving. In the second part, when he enters the room, the angle of the shot that allows him not to be looked in the face increases to 90° in view of the limited space; and, every time this angle risks being reduced to fewer than 45°, the protagonist stops moving. In the last part of the film, when the protagonist drowns off, the camera takes advantage of his sleep and frees itself from seemingly being limited to positions with less than a 90°-angle freedom of movement behind him. It pushes into the field of vision of the remaining 270°, finally revealing the protagonist's face. The protagonist wakes up with a start and looks at the person who is looking at him. That is, it is himself.

As Beckett specifies in his screenplay, “in order to be figured in this situation the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit. It will not be clear until the end of the film that the pursuing perceiver is not extraneous but self,” (Beckett, 1967, 21). In fact, the ending is an authentic *coup de cinéma*, one that unveils the protagonist's face along with a kind of *mise en abîme* founded on the dialectics between presence and absence. (Robbe-Grillet 1965) This dialogue is featured for most of the film through a masterful use of the cinematographic off-screen, which reveals itself fully on screen at the end, when the camera reveals that everything that the spectator has seen since the beginning was not the objective vision of the camera but the subjective vision of the protagonist of himself.

Hence, the exact directions for movement that Beckett inserted in the screenplay managed to serve his purposes on several levels. As he declared, Beckett, first of all, wanted to take absolute control over the *techne*, over the film apparatus. He wanted to probe its representative potential through speculating about the subjectivity and objectivity of the vision offered to the spectator. Beckett pointed out in the screenplay: “Until the end of the film O [object] is perceived by E [eye] from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°. Convention: O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness, only when this angle is exceeded” (Beckett, 1984, 164). The surprise effect at the end takes place in virtue of the disorientation experienced by the spectator in front of his or her own interpretation of a representative and dramatic convention in cinema that Beckett takes issue with, speculating on the dialectic between presence and absence as well as between the objectivity and subjectivity of vision. “Subjectivity” refers to that type of shot and convention of representation and drama in which the look of the spectator coincides with the look of the character, determining a psychological transference between the first and the second. The precise directions for camera movement that Beckett inserted in the screenplay transform the camera into a

dramatis persona, one who, in the role of an authentic co-protagonist, interacts with the actor from the very beginning, initiating a silent and dynamic dialogue with him. (Schneider 1997) The entire structure of the film is entrusted to a *sui generis* dialogue and a transference of a look that starts out as objective and ends up as subjective, crossing through the various phases of the act of observation little by little, phases that correspond, in turn, to an equal number of the varieties in the reciprocal relationship between character's perceiving and his being perceived. Beside the transference of the look, there is also the transference of a psychological state, caused by the spectators' processes of identification and projection in relation to the protagonist and other characters as well, whether they be people he encounters or animals or the objects that the protagonist feels are looking at him as he gradually covers them with black drapes.

The screenplay, conceived and elaborated in this way, seems to posit itself as a kind of radical piece of research on *the writing of movement* or on the original essence of cinema and the potentials of representation and dramatization entrusted to the vision of movement, and, reciprocally, to the movement of vision, according to a complex relationship, a bi-univocal complementariness and correspondence involving technology, the object of vision, the subject of vision and vision itself. In conducting such a kind of speculation, Beckett makes the actor-camera complex the fulcrum of a symbolism of the perception and self-perception of his *Film*.

Thus it is no accident that Gilles Deleuze refers to *Film* in his book, *Image-Mouvement*, to illustrate the symbolism of perception in its varieties in terms of three filmic conventions that he terms: *image-action*, when the protagonist acts unobserved; *image-perception*, when he stops after he feels he is being observed; and (3) *image-affection*, when he finally observes himself (Deleuze, 1983, 93-97).

In this way, Deleuze's interest in the work of Beckett's may appear instrumental for a definition of image-movement as the matrix and derivative of the other images. The exegesis of *Film* that results from a such a theoretical reflection leads Deleuze to maintain that the final black screen refers us back to sleep, to death, or to that last and first nothing, meant as the image-movement, where every human being will sink at the beginning just as at the end of his being. For this reason, the protagonist's attempt to remove himself from his own look and that of others should be interpreted, according to Deleuze, as the expression of the will not to exist.

This is an interpretation -- that of Deleuze -- that seems to be legitimized by the quotation of George Berkeley's famous formula, *esse est percipi*, which Beckett introduces in the screenplay, and, furthermore, has legitimized many to maintain that *Film* consists in a cinematographic illustration of the principle of Immaterialism theorized by the Irish bishop in the seventeenth century.⁴

⁴ "Film is an illustration of the philosophical principle, 'esse est percipi'" (Bertineti 2002, XXVII). Cf. Bertineti P. 2009, 76-81; Sulpizio 2007, 83-100; Michelone 1999, 110-130.

Nevertheless, one could hold the position, which is perhaps just as legitimate, that the symbolism of perception in *Film* presents us with resonance and refraction in relation to a *quaestio* addressed to theoretical demands that are not as remote as Immaterialism and are much closer to Beckett, not only from the point of view of history.

In the first place, one could consider the conception of vision and of the visible represented in *Film* as a natural transition of the reflection by Beckett developed in those years even through short stories like *L'image* (1958-60) and *Imagination morte imaginez* (1965). In the latter, for example, an eye opens and nevertheless can never see or be seen by the eye of the other body, co-protagonist of the story, just as what happens in *Film* through the silent, dynamic, and, as it were, impossible dialogue between the man and the camera.

Then, in the story, *L'image*, there is a reference to philosopher Nicholas Malebranche, whose function is somewhat analogous to that of the quotation from Berkeley in the screenplay of *Film*, or, and evocation of thought suspended between a past marked by the divine and a present dominated by the death of God.⁵ As Renato Oliva points out in reference to the story written between 1959 and 1960: “once the faith in that God who acts as the guardian of the relationship between the soul and the body disappears... there is nothing left but the complex and extremely exact spectacle of a universal clock without a Clockmaker or clockmaker” (Oliva, 1989, 15).

One might also observe how in *Film* this “complex and extremely exact spectacle is an extreme step of a kind of *cosmoclastia* or “cosmos-breaking” determined by a look that is no longer subjective but objective and objectual. This *cosmoclastia* is expressed by the symbolism of perception and self-perception that is founded on the actor-camera complex. In reference to the role of the actor and of recited drama, it is evident that the symbolism of perception and self-perception is entrusted to gestural movement of abstract value, which is the exact stylistic code of Buster Keaton’s comedy. (Celati 1997; Tinazzi 1993)

Furthermore, the abstract and ideal value of the movement is reached through recourse to that gestural typology defined by Eisenstein as the “gesture of rejection” and considered by him to be one of the foundations of his cinematic aesthetics based on Marxist dialectical thought and, particularly, on the value of the negative (we may recall that Beckett wrote a letter to the Latvian director and theoretician to propose that he collaborate with him, unfortunately never received.) The substance of the protagonist’s

⁵ The expression in *L'image*: “It [the dog] had the same notion at the same instant Malebranche” is an index of the suspension between a past marked by the divine and a present dominated by the death of God in as much as the implicit reference in the passage cited by Beckett is naturally a reference to Malebranche’s reflection on the instant, which is understood as the instant in which the movement is made that manifests the concurrence of the will of God and that of the human being (Beckett 1995, 165).

movement, in effect, consists in a negation of the self that manifests itself in his constant removing himself from the look of others and himself. Effectively, his blinding himself and chasing out the animals that he felt were observing him is to be interpreted in this way, according to the modes and forms that repeat the celebrated sight gags in which Keaton combats, as André Bazin says, his personal war against the world, even the animal and objectual world that punctually turns against him, alienating and reifying him.⁶

This is a gesture of rejection through which the protagonist denies the sight of his own face to others, to the camera and, finally, to himself. The famous “face that never smiles” of Keaton’s appears like this in the ending with all of the expressive strength of a look that has become famous for being alienated and alienating and that implicitly evokes his own self-perception, expressed in a tragicomic manner in the meta-cinematographic works that he directed or co-directed, such as *The Cameraman*, where the protagonist uses technological equipment to recognize himself and have others recognize him.

One could maintain that the gesture of rejection of the look made by Beckett through the silent and dynamic dialogue activated by the actor-camera complex constitutes a kind of absolute negation with a radical critical value in the face of a world and a technology of power of alienation and reification. (Maude 2009) These are critiques that, again through refraction and resonance, can be seen to re-emerge in the context of the philosophical reflection animated by critical thought and theory, *in primis*, of Theodor Adorno, who, as is known, insists on negation and its function both from the ideological and aesthetic point of view in the works of Beckett.⁷

Nevertheless, the reflection developed on *techne* by Beckett through this meta-cinematographic work does not seem to develop in the direction of critical thought as much as towards a more general speculation of an aesthetic nature on the relationship between the “eye of the twentieth century” – that is, cinema – and some pre-eminent issues of his era.

⁶ “Slapstick is first and foremost, or at least also, the dramatic expression of the tyranny of things, out of which Keaton even more than Chaplin knew how to create a tragedy of the Object.” (Bazin 2005, 121)

⁷ In Beckett’s works, “the content becomes its formal principle and the negation of content altogether. Beckett’s oeuvre gives the frightful answer to art that by its starting point, by its distance from any praxis, art in the face of mortal threat becomes ideology through the harmlessness of its mere form, regardless of its content.” (Adorno 2005, 339). This observation made by Paolo Bertinetti can be shared: “The postulate from which Beckett begins is that realism no longer has the instruments necessary to represent reality. Therefore there should be other roads to go down. His is the road of the emptying of traditional forms and the proposal of that absolute negativity that, proclaimed by his admirer Adorno, incarnated horror without compromise and thus served freedom.” (Bertinetti 2009, 77).

For these reasons, Beckett's speculation could somehow place itself in resonance with the thought of Merleau-Ponty on cinema expressed in his book, *Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie* (1948): cinema "shows us the correspondence between thought and techniques; in fact, cinema, joins with philosophy because "it presents us with every consciousness thrown into the world, submitted to the look of the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 80).

"Argument of the film: Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception," Beckett writes in his screenplay. The protagonist "E is therefore at pains throughout pursuit to keep within this 'angle of immunity' [where he is not seen by others]." He is "hastening *blindly* to illusory sanctuary" away from the world, but this attempt, Beckett adds meaningfully, "culminates in the inevitability of self-perception." He warns, "No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience" (Beckett, 1984, 163). This last warning of Beckett's is such that it sheds light on the absolute correspondence between the technical-formal apparatus and the themes of perception and of being that were being critiqued by various mid-twentieth century theories – those that postulated the crisis of the notions of subject, consciousness, and existence, with the consequent inclination towards self-analysis and self-reflection.

Film offers the spectator the phenomenology of the perception of a body who is at the same time seeing and able to be seen, but who, in order to see himself, "needs someone who observes him" (again, in the words of Merleau-Ponty) and who sends him back "his image in an unexpected manner" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 157-158). Nevertheless, this sending back of the image given by the look of the other appears, under these circumstances, not so much as a mirroring or restitution of the Ego as it is an alienating and reifying power play, capable of demonstrating -- exactly, in the *being-thrown-into-the-world/Geworfenheit* – the crisis of the subject, his consciousness, and his existence.

It is no accident that the screenplay of *Film* brings a reference to the economic crisis through the setting of the dialogue between Eye and Object in New York in 1929. Although no explicit historical contextualization appears in the completed film, it is evident that Object is shown while he is wandering through the sparse ruins of a metropolis or, *in extenso*, of the world, taken almost as the equivalent of the *lacrimae rerum* of an indefinite Great Crisis, according to a setting that is in some ways similar to what Adorno gathered in *Endgame* and that can make us recognize a relationship of *sui generis* reciprocity between the works of the playwright and the philosopher, a relationship that could be defined as the emblem of refractiveness much more than resonance: "Whereas pre-Beckett existentialism cannibalized philosophy for poetic purposes, Beckett, as educated as anyone, presents the bill: philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy and the dreamlike dross of the experiential word, and the poetic process shows itself as worn out" (Adorno, 2000, 335).

The *percipi* of *Film* presents some refractiveness and some resonance with phenomenological and existentialist *percipi*, particularly the *percipi* whose being Jean Paul Sartre investigates in a good part of *Being and Nothingness*, much beyond the chapter entitled “The Being of the *Percipi*.”

At the beginning of *Film*, the man appears to the spectator, the other, and himself as an authentic object, a “blind and deaf thing.” He is there and that is all. He acts mysteriously, lacking, as Sartre would say, any *raisons* or motivations. When Object enters the room and iterates the moving gestures of his rejection of the look of others and of himself, then his consciousness emerges, which does not receive the “in-self” passively, but inserts it into a framework of sense that goes beyond ugly factualness. The being of *percipi* and also of *percipiens* is discovered -- or rather, those figments and acts of the imagination that will lead all the way to the phantasms of the double.

For that reason, the rejection of the look of the Other, as Beckett writes in the screenplay, inevitably culminates in self-perception. This may happen -- to return to Sartre -- in view of this: “simply because I am my own mediator between Me and Me, all objectivity disappears” (Sartre 1992, 366). Inserting Object inside the frame of figments and acts of the imagination, the consciousness negates this Object just as the “in-self” “un-realizes” it, in the manner of Sartre. The relationship between the “in-itself” and the “for-itself” -- in function of the relationship between objectification and consciousness, which emerges in this way -- demonstrates a consonance with the theorization of the “for-others” that Sartre elaborates through the thematization of shame.⁸

Observing the development of the work from this perspective of refractiveness, the phases of a totalizing crisis manifest themselves, a crisis that assails the humanity of the man through subjectivity, consciousness and existence.

At first, the protagonist is an object both for the other characters and for the spectator. After that, in the solitude of the room, he appears to the spectator as a subject who is observing things, and through these things, himself. (Schneider 1994) That is, a consciousness appears gradually in the protagonist. This consciousness is in some way a reflection in two meanings of the term. First, it is a reflection given by self-perception that realizes the doubling of the identity. (It is no accident that the first gesture completed by the protagonist when he enters the room is that of covering the mirror).

⁸“The Being of the *Percipi*” constitutes a fundamental thematization in the “Search for being” with which Sartre opens his introductory chapter of *Being and Nothingness* and with which he dwells on, in the third part of the book, the reflection on the look and especially on the “Look of the other” and on the “being-seen-by-the-others.” This last reflection is entirely focused on shame: “It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of the look. It is the shame or pride which makes me live not know the situation of being looked at. Now shame, as we noted at the beginning of the chapter, is shame of self. It is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging.” (Sartre 1992, 350).

Second, his consciousness is a reflection that denotes self-reflection and self-analysis through thought. One of the last gestures that the protagonist completes is, not accidentally, that of observing the photographs that portray his life through his relationship with his mother, his father, his friends, and his wife.

However, it happens that, while the spectator is beginning to see him and, above all, to understand him as a subject, the protagonist begins to perceive and understand himself as an object. In fact, he begins to feel that he is being observed by the animals and things: the image of (perhaps) a god of classical antiquity hanging on the wall, the crest rail of a rocking chair that has two openings similar to eyes, the two eye-like buttons-and-string of the large envelope where the photographs are kept. In this way, he has an extraordinary though painful anti-climax that culminates in the *coup de cinéma* of the man alone with himself. Beckett writes in the screenplay, “All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being” (Beckett, 1984, 165). Nevertheless, if the perception of the self continues to exist, it exists by now as self-perception of an object. The protagonist participates in the condition of the objects. This is the last port of call of the circumnavigation of his self-consciousness.

From Sartre’s “hell is the others” one proceeds backwards, *à rebours*, to Hugo’s “hell of solitude.” In solitude, the consciousness of the protagonist, through shame, little by little introjects the alienating look of the other and turns it back against himself. Not only that, however, consciousness -- the ultimate product of human evolution that allows thought, action and being to react to itself, to give itself feedback -- regresses until it again becomes a kind of archaic paleo-consciousness, which is represented by the double. (Badiou 2008) The alienating power of the look of the other, inflicted on oneself, doubles its power, according to a deleterious *transference*. The protagonist becomes pure object and pure eye to himself.

Such an anticlimax allows the spectator to see and understand the regression of the protagonist’s consciousness, which coincides with the transference of subjectivity and humanity to animals and things and, at the same time, which realizes a progressive stripping away of humanity. The gesture with which the protagonist rips us the photographs of his affections – in as much as they are the extinction of feeling and the removal of identity – appears as the ultimate and definitive act of loss of his own humanity, which, not accidentally, immediately follows the final epiphany of the double.

Hence the anti-climax conceived of by Beckett consists in a *crescendo* of de-humanization manifested by gestures of rejection that are little by little increasingly symbolic, little by little increasingly abstract, and little by little increasingly cut off from reality, which express the loss of the principle of reality in the very forms of the objectification of the absurd. (Gontarsky 1997)

The spectator observes a consciousness blinded by its own power of observation and dazzled by reflections in the mirrors of objectivity and subjectivity, which, from

supreme human aspiration, is degraded into the lowest, most miserable, and most inhuman one. Consciousness is an uncertain and oscillating reflection, born in history, living through its personal history, and subjected to history and can be extinguished easily by a gust of wind that, once more, is historical.

In fact, a last clue in the screenplay goes right in this direction and is the date, 1913, which appears cancelled and substituted by Beckett with the date 1929. Therefore he is not only a posthumous man, a man degraded to Eye and Object in the pure state, but he is also a man who is about to move towards the crisis and barbarism of the Great War. Nevertheless, it is evident at his point that it could indifferently have to do with World War II or any war, given the power of the abstraction of the work. (Fruttero 1994; Id. 1956; Restivo 1991)

Therefore the anticlimax of this man appears as a kind of dramatization of the phases of a regressive process of humanity. This is a cruel but necessary dramatization in as far as it contemporaneously addresses the spectator with a trans-historical observation and a warning about the fact that the uncertainty of the human being between evolution and regression is played out, is recited, once again and always, on the stage of consciousness.

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