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## An on Screen Philosophical Debate — Bishop Berkeley's *esse est percipi* and Samuel Beckett's *Film*

**Abstract:** Being well read in philosophy, Samuel Beckett was familiar with George Berkeley's works and his concept of *esse est percipi* which was the foundation for the philosopher's immaterialism and spiritualism. The great Irish artist used this idea to propagate quite different ideas. In his novels and plays the idea of being seen, and heard, is, in fact, closer to Martin Buber's notion of the need for the other than to the Bishop's understanding of the concept. In his only script, *Film*, Beckett presents a vision diametrically different from that of the bishop-philosopher. Focusing on life which, as he argued in the essay *Proust*, is an "expiation for the eternal sin of having been born," the playwright states that even though the main protagonist desperately avoids being seen by people or even animals, he still exists. The idea is clearly specified in the introductory note to the script written by Beckett: "All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self perception remains in being."

**Keywords:** Berkeley, *esse est percipi*, Beckett, *Film*

George Berkeley (1685–1753) advanced a theory which he called "immaterialism" (later referred to as "subjective idealism"). This theory denies the existence of material substance and concedes that familiar objects are only ideas in the minds of perceivers and, as a result, cannot exist without being perceived. In his philosophical treatise, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley argues: "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse est percipi*, nor is it possible that they should have any existence out of the minds of thinking things which perceive them" (66). The assumption concerning the necessity of being perceived in order to exist posed problems with the durability and the unity of objects. A solution to this difficulty was provided by another field of Berkeley's philosophy, namely his spiritualism. He introduced "the will of the Creator.

He alone is he who, ‘upholding all things by word of His power,’ maintains that intercourse between spirits enables them to perceive the existence of each other. And yet this pure and clear light which enlightens every one is itself invisible” (Berkeley 1972: 140).

In his book, *Einstein and Beckett. A Record of an Imaginary Discussion with Albert Einstein and Samuel Beckett*, Schlossberg (46) argues that for Beckett perception (or being perceived by others) is equivalent to existence, which would infer the influence of the philosopher’s ideas on the Nobel prize winner. On the one hand, it has been proved by Beckett’s biographers and critics that he was perfectly familiar with Berkeley’s philosophy and that his novels, plays, notebooks and correspondence express his interest in and criticism of the Bishop’s ideas.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous references to the need of being seen or heard in his oeuvre<sup>2</sup> and, as Smith argues, its influence is not restricted to the content, but also to the form of *Trilogy* and *How It Is* (331). On the other hand, however, Beckett’s references to the philosopher’s ideas often cause philosophical controversy over their validity. Furthermore, in Beckett’s Godless universe they are not used as spiritualistic proof for God’s existence.

It seems that, while the associations with Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* are valid and fully justified, the need to be perceived so often voiced by the Beckettian characters, also has something in common with the philosophy of Martin Buber and his idea of the need of the other, satisfied by the I-Thou relationship.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that Beckett was familiar with the Austrian-born Jewish philosopher’s theories. Both of them were interested in existential issues and while Buber introduced the philosophy of dialogue, a variant of existentialism, Beckett’s *oeuvre* may be considered as an illustration of the existential dilemmas faced by his modern everyman.

Beckett’s views concerning human existence appear in his essay *Proust* which is of equal validity in analysing Marcel Proust’s work as the literary output of Samuel Beckett. Just like Proust’s characters, Beckett’s also have to expiate “for the eternal sin of having been born” (Beckett 1970: 67) and thus their lives are characterised by the “suffering of being” (Beckett 1970: 8). In most cases they are lonely, forlorn creatures, suspended between despair and hope, finding occasional relief in different kinds of habit, often employed with the help of the other. Their lot is best exemplified by two sentences, the first coming from *Murphy*: “The sun shone,

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Ackerley and Gontarski 2006: 49; Gontarski 2006: 156; Casanova 2007: 68; Harvey 1970: 247–249; Calder 2001: 4; Uhlmann 2006: 118; Beckett 2009: 154.

<sup>2</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski 2006: 50; Uhlmann 1991: 176; Gontarski and Uhlmann 2006: 11; Smith 1998: 332.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this issue see Uchman 2014. It seems noteworthy to contend that, while a similarity between Buber’s and Beckett’s views on the relationship between the characters can be noticed in many works of the Irishman, it does not apply to *Film* which concentrates on the issue of self-perception.

having no alternative, on the nothing new” (5). While the sentence quoted opens the novel, the following one closes another, also a part of *The Trilogy*, namely *The Unnamable*: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (382). Beckett’s characters cannot stand their lives being characterized by suffering, yet they realize there is no choice left to them they “must go on.” Suspended between hope and despair, they go on living and suffering, their only help in this dreadful situation being Habit (Beckett 1970: 8, 16): talking, inventing stories, playing games and inventing other pastimes to keep up with their companions (if they have any). Most of them seem to be repeating the Unnamable’s utterance. Occasionally, they may think about committing suicide, as Vladimir and Estragon do in *Waiting for Godot*. Do they really want to end their lives, however? It might be argued that they do not think about it seriously and the thought only comes when they have an interval in their habitual activities. It is then that, after a silence, looking at the tree Vladimir says “What do we do now?” and the following dialogue ensues:

ESTRAGON: Wait.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It’d give us an erection.

ESTRAGON: (*highly excited*). An erection! (17)

It can be justifiably argued that they do not treat the idea of committing suicide seriously as, firstly the phrase “what about,” repeatedly occurring in their dialogues, marks the moment of their enlarged awareness of “the suffering of being”, and the need to employ some kind of Habit to muffle it. Secondly, no suicide victim could be expected to think about an erection while contemplating ending his life. The situation in most of Beckett’s plays in many respects, at least, resembles that in *Waiting for Godot* — thrown into a hopeless existence the characters wait for their deaths to come.<sup>4</sup>

The question might be asked whether Beckett’s characters, belonging to “the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned” them, in Vladimir’s phrasing (79), really are aware of the situation they are in. Winnie, the heroine of *Happy Days*, seems to be another interesting case in this respect. On the one hand, she expresses a death wish (33–34), on the other, however, she repeatedly uses the phrase “happy day”; she complains about the bell which “hurts like a knife” (54) yet, on various occasions, she repeats the same idea: “can’t complain — (*looks for spectacles*) — no, no — (*takes up spectacles*) — mustn’t complain — (*holds up spectacles, looks through lens*) — so much to be thankful for — (*looks through other lens*) — no pain — (*puts on spectacles*) — hardly any — (*looks for toothbrush*) — wonderful

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger’s terms “Geworfenheit” “Dasein” and “Sein zum Tode” seem to be very appropriate for describing the situation of the Beckettian characters especially if one takes into account the fact that Beckett in the late twenties was on friendly terms with Jean Beaufret, who, according to the artist’s own words, was “a very well known philosopher and a specialist on Heidegger” (Knowlson 1996: 104).

thing that — (*takes up toothbrush*) — nothing like it — (*examines handle of toothbrush*) — slight ache sometimes — ” (11). One might wonder to what extent she is aware of her hopeless situation. Beckett said: “She’s not stoic, she’s unaware” (Worth 1990: 48).<sup>5</sup> It seems that this opinion refers to most of Beckett’s characters. If they are conscious of this, it is so only in the rare, painful moments of full awareness from which they soon escape thanks to the blessed Habit — games, talking, being assured of the other’s existence and the certainty that they are perceived (i.e. seen or heard). The need for the other seems to characterize the existence of most of them.

In this context *Film*, the only cinematic work in Beckett’s canon, bearing the generic title, seems to be an exception. While Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* is of greater importance in this piece than in any other work of the Nobel prize winner, at the same time the script departs from the original idea to a great extent. On the one hand, in a lot of Beckett’s works the need to be seen (and heard) is a way for the characters to get reassurance about their existence and also a way of forming a satisfactory relationship in accordance with Martin Buber’s notion of the I-Thou bond, and is, therefore, something to be yearned for. On the other, in the case of *Film*, perception is to be avoided because only in this way, can the protagonist argue that it is possible to stop existing. Thus, then, O, the protagonist, is an exception in Beckett’s canon — he is the only character who desperately seeks death, total annihilation.

Before analysing *Film* it seems worthwhile to devote some time to Beckett’s interest in the cinematic art. His biographer, James Knowlson writes:

He had always been very interested in cinema. And at this time [1936] he borrowed many books on the subject, reading about the director Vsevolod Pudovkin and the theoretician Rudolf Arnheim and going through back numbers of *Close-up*. He even seriously considered going to Moscow to the State Institute of Cinematography, writing a letter to Sergei Eisenstein in which he asked him to take him on as a trainee. He thought that the possibilities for the silent film had been far from exhausted and that, with the development of color talkies, “a backwater may be created for the two-dimensional silent film that had barely emerged from the rudiments when it was swamped. Then there would be two separate things and no question of a fight between them, or rather of a rout.” (212–213)

Beckett’s interest in the silver screen is noticeable in numerous intertextual cinematic references in his *Film*<sup>6</sup>, as well as his specific treatment of light and the focus being centred on the subjective reality. Writing about the similarities between Eisenstein’s theory and practice and those of Beckett, Antoine-Dunne concedes:

<sup>5</sup> On 22 December 2009, to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Beckett’s death, TV Kultura broadcast a production of *Happy Days* starring Maja Komorowska and directed by Antoni Libera. It was preceded by an interview with the two of them. Even though they had been producing the drama together for sixteen years their opinions concerning Winnie differed: Komorowska argued that she was an optimist while Libera expressed the opposite opinion, adding that, ultimately, the decision has to be taken by each individual viewer (Majcherek 1989).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of these, see, for instance, Feshbach 1999: 345.

“Eisenstein believed that film brought to fulfilment the promise of all other art forms and that film’s capacity to unite time and space in movement enabled it to bridge the gap between subjective and objective reality” and his “paper analyses Beckett’s use of light and shows that the unique usage is based on a belief in the ability of film to project directly into the mind of viewer or auditor and to map psychic states” (315).

The psychic state of O is really the subject matter of *Film*. Kundert-Gibbert contends that Beckett, “like other artists of the time, including John Cage (in music) and two of Beckett’s favourites, Bram van Velde and Tal Coal (painting), discarded with the closure of meaning and a traditionally comprehensible structure in favour of a minimalistic expression of extreme subjectivity and the richness of open-ended iterations on a motif” (365).

Writing about Beckett’s attitude to life and art, Lawrence Harvey concedes:

During conversations in 1961 and 1962 Beckett frequently expressed himself on his activity as a writer in relation to his existence as a human being. [...] An image Beckett used repeatedly to express his sense of the unreality of life on the surface was ‘existence by proxy.’ [...] On another occasion he made an association between this feeling and the idealist philosophy of Berkeley. Perhaps it was an Irish thing, basically a scepticism before nature as given, complicated by scepticism about the perceiving subject as well. (247)

This scepticism, along with Beckett’s interest in Berkeley’s theory, are the basic issues tackled in *Film*.

The idea for the venture was suggested by Barney Rosset, the head of Grove Press and Beckett’s publisher who in 1963 approached three “intellectually fashionable authors playing out the absurdist line, authors he had also published with good success,” Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter, “with a project to make three half-hour movies.” Only in the case of Beckett was the undertaking successfully completed. A series of preproduction sessions took place in New York in the summer of 1964, whose participants, apart from Beckett were Alan Schneider (director), Boris Kaufman (cinematographer) and Barney Rosset (producer). Their transcript has been published by Gontarski (1985b) and a documentary film on the production has been shot.<sup>7</sup> The history of the creation of this work leaves a lot to be desired, a point voiced by Gontarski in “*Film* and Formal Integrity”:

A full biography of the composition of *Film* is not now possible because the textual evidence is not as complete as for other works. Beckett’s primary creative effort was recorded in a gold, soft-covered, seventy-leaf notebook on deposit at the University of Reading’s Beckett Archive [...]. The notebook contains two full holograph versions of *Film*. The first, {is} called both ‘Notes for Film’ and ‘*Percipi* Notes,’ dated Ussy, 5 April 1963 [...]. The subtitle accurately describes the work: ‘For Eye and Him [revised to ‘One’] who does not wish to [revised to ‘would not’] be seen” (p. 2). The summary on the title page suggests that Beckett had a very clear idea about the nature of this work from the very beginning: “For one striving to see one striving not

<sup>7</sup> *Wikipedia* provides the following information: “*Notfilm* is a 2015 feature-film documentary, directed by Ross Lipman on the production of playwright Samuel Beckett’s only film, an experimental short entitled *Film* starring Buster Keaton.”

to be seen.” This earliest version is followed [...] by a series of holograph notes and a second version called “Outline sent to Grove [...]”.<sup>8</sup> The earliest notes available suggest that Beckett began the composition of his film uncharacteristically, with a clearly established theme that remained unaltered throughout composition [...]. In Beckett’s revisions of *Film* we see clearly what he wanted to do, in what direction he was trying to shape his film-script but in the final work we can also see much of that intention unrealized. (*The Intent*: 105, 111)

The plot of *Film* seems to be comparatively simple, a point made by Schneider: “It’s a movie about the perceiving eye, about the perceived and the perceiver — two aspects of the same man. The perceiver desires like mad to perceive, the perceived tries desperately to hide. Then, in the end, one wins.”<sup>9</sup> The perceived (the object — O) is trying to escape the eye (E)<sup>10</sup>, that is the camera. Beckett specifies clearly his stand in the general notes:

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception remains in being.

Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception.

No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.

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 end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self.

Until end of film O is perceived by E from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°. Convention: O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness, only when this angle is exceeded. (163)

The film consists of three parts, the division reflecting the place of action. Part 1 — the street, presents a “dead straight street,” and the

Moderate animation of workers going unhurriedly to work. All going in the same direction and all in couples [...]. All persons in opening scene to be shown in some way perceiving—one another, an object, a shop window, a poster, etc. i.e., all contently in *percipere* and *percipi* [...]. O finally comes into view hastening blindly along sidewalk, hugging the wall on the left, in opposite direction to all the others. Long dark overcoat (whereas all others in light summer dress) with collar up, hat pulled down over eyes, briefcase in left hand, right hand shielding exposed side of face [...]. O, entering perceivedness, reacts [...] by halting and cringing aside towards wall. E immediately draws to close the angle (2) and O, released from perceivedness, hurries on” (164). In this part of the script some people are visible, all of them contrasted with O — they are in couples, they are moving in the opposite direction, they are wearing light summer clothes and do not mind being perceived. Yet the couple who are caught by the camera a little later on, share O’s fear — after having been spotted by it they have to recover from shock:

<sup>8</sup> Feshbach mentions yet another publication: Samuel Beckett. *Film, Complete Scenario, Illustrations, Production shots, with an essay “On Directing Film”* by Alan Schneider (New York: Grove Press, n.d) (361, n. 3).

<sup>9</sup> “Beckett.” *The New Yorker* 8 Aug. 1964: 22–23. Quoted by Knowlson 1996: 463–464.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth paying attention to the Eye/I pun. The final moments of the film reveal that E is not only the eye/the camera which is watching, but also the I of the protagonist, and thus they demonstrate that it is not possible to escape self-perception.



“He opens his mouth to vituperate. She checks him with a gesture and soft ‘shhh!’”(165). The “shhh!” is the only sound emitted in this otherwise silent movie.<sup>11</sup>

The reaction of the couple is described in more detail: “As they both stare at E the expression gradually comes over their faces will be that of the flower woman in the stairs scene and that of O at the end of the film, the expression only to be described as corresponding to an agony of perceivedness.” (165).

The second scene takes place in the vestibule, on the stairs and presents O still trying to avoid being seen. The only other character who appears in it is the aforementioned flower woman: “She halts and looks full at E. Gradually same expression as that of the couple in street. She closes her eyes, then sinks to the ground and lies with face in scattered flowers” (166). The last scene presents the only character visible — O — hiding from E in a room and consists, as Beckett argues, of three parts:

1. Preparation of room (occlusion of window and mirror, ejection of dog and cat, destruction of God’s image, occlusion of parrot and goldfish)
2. Period in rocking-chair. Inspection and destruction of photographs.
3. Final investment of O by E and dénouement. (167)

For O, the room seems to be a desired shelter in which he hopes, to find an escape from perceivedness, a point clearly made by Beckett: “Here we assume the problem of dual perception solved and enter O’s perception” (166). Already on the stairs, in the shot film (but not in the printed script) he checks his pulse. No reaction of his is presented, yet we may assume he still detects his heart beat. He does the same after having closed and locked the door and, for the third time, when he is already sitting in the rocking chair. On all three occasions, no reaction of his is shown. Those three shots indicate clearly that he is hoping to stop existing.

The room, which is the setting for the third scene, deserves some attention as it is filled with animals and objects, all of which seem to be looking at O, as if inspecting him. Beckett was very explicit in describing the room during the pre-production discussions of *Film*:

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<sup>11</sup> The correspondence between Beckett and Schneider, edited by Harmon, is interesting in many respects because it contains an exchange of opinions pertaining to the playwright’s dramas directed by the latter. As far as the scene with the couple is concerned, the dramatist wrote the following: “I have thought a lot about that distressing couple. Of course the ‘shhh’ without the look has no meaning. And I don’t see how we can eliminate them completely. Again my feeling is to reduce them to their essential functions. The ‘shhh’ & the look, cutting out O’s inspection of them and their actual exit from frame. Harold rang from London very warm about the film & with some good points. He finds Buster’s look of horror at the best unconvincing and thinks it might be shortened. I’m inclined to agree. With his suggestions for a sound track (‘selective natural sounds’) I disagree entirely, as with Fred Jordan’s arguments in favour of some kind of sound. I am quite decided now that I want it silent” (178). The letter quoted above clearly indicates the meticulous attention paid to even the minutest details not only by Beckett but also by a number of other people involved, to a greater or smaller extent, in the venture.

This place [the room] is a trap prepared for him, with nothing in it that wasn't trapped. There is nothing in this place, this room, that isn't prepared for him.

One might suppose that his mother had gone to hospital. It can't be his room because he wouldn't have a room of this kind. He wouldn't have a room full of eyes. (Gontarski 1985b: 190)

Apart from the eyes of animals and God, and the objects connected with perception (i.e. a mirror and a window with possible onlookers outside) mentioned in the printed text, the shot version of the film presents extra eyes: those of the headrest of the rocking chair and those visible on the folder containing photographs — which has been closed by means of a special gadget made of two buttons and a piece of string. The introduction of two pairs of eyes in the shot film is an example of some of the changes initiated in the process of working on the venture. Knowlson quotes what one of the participants making the film said:

The rocker we were using happened to have two holes in the headrest, which began to glare at us. Sam was delighted and encouraged us to include the headrest.<sup>12</sup> The folder from which photographs were taken had two eyelets, well proportioned. Another pair of "eyes" for O to avoid. (465–466)

Having got rid of all the "eyes" which endanger him, O sits down in the rocking chair and opens the folder, containing, for certain, his own images from the past: (1) a male infant of 6 months, his mother's "severe eyes devouring him" (173); (2) 4 years old, praying, being watched attentively by his mother<sup>13</sup>; (3) 15 years old, teaching a dog, which is looking at him, to beg; (4) 20 years old, on graduation day with a "section of public watching" (174), (5) 21 years old, with fiancée; (6) 25 years, "Newly enlisted [...]. Holding a little girl in his arms. She looks into his face, exploring it with finger" (174) and, finally (7) "The same. 30 years. Looking over 40. Wearing hat and overcoat. Patch over left eye. Cleanshaven. Grim expression" (174).

The photographs, taken in the past on different occasions, often show him being watched — by his mother, the little girl and the dog - a condition defined as *esse est percipi*. He sometimes has an emotional link with them, his hands are trembling when he inspects pictures 5 and 6 and he touches with his forefinger the little girl's face in photograph 6. All the same, he destroys them all, tearing them in four and dropping the pieces on the floor. The last picture deserves some attention — we do

<sup>12</sup> Note 54, p. 717: "In his manuscript notes, Beckett had not envisaged these 'eye' holes but had written: 'Make chair back memorable' and foresaw an 'upright back, intersecting wooden bars or langes.'" The Faber & Faber edition reads: "the curiously carved headrest" (167).

<sup>13</sup> The pictures O inspects may have some autobiographical reference. The first and the second may relate to Beckett's own childhood and youth. The picture of the praying child evokes the well known picture of the small Beckett praying, which was a fake (Cronin 20). The severe eyes of the mother, on the other hand, mentioned in reference to both of them, may be a reference to Beckett's mother. Their relationship was far from satisfactory and, in a letter written to Tom McGreevy on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1933, he mentioned in detail her savage loving (Beckett 2009: 552).



not know when the picture was taken, he looks the same as he does in the present. What needs to be stressed, however, is the fact that at the age of 30 he looked over 40 and he had a grim expression. Both of these highlight his exhaustion with having to bear the “suffering of being” which is intrinsically bound with his existence.

Bignell argues that the pictures “entail the mechanical remembering of lived identity for the individual [...]. They appeared to be a pure moment of perception by a transcendent other, like the perception of God in Berkeley’s account. Although O strokes his photographs as he examines them in *Film*, suggesting precisely the nostalgic construction of a history of identity, the photographs preserve the traces which authenticate being, so O tears them up” (36). It could be argued that O’s attitude to the photographs is a reflection of the discrepancy between the past, as remembered, and the recorded past as it actually was.

Memory, as such, is strictly connected with, and subject to, the laws of Habit. Since all living is Habit, Beckett wants to make us aware that this filters our perception and distorts our view of reality. For Beckett, as he contends in *Proust*, memory becomes conditioned through perception. Rather than providing us with a moment for discovery and the contemplation of reality, it becomes distorted through perception. “Strictly speaking we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to what Habit does not possess the key” (Beckett, *Proust*, 18). This kind of memory Beckett calls “involuntary memory” and is contrasted with “voluntary memory” which “is of no use as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image far removed from the real” (4). Furthermore, it “is not memory, but the application of a concordance to the Old Testament of the individual” (19). Voluntary memory’s “action has been compared by Proust to that of turning the leaves of an album of photographs” (19). In this respect, the photographs undergoing O’s inspection and reaction are similar to the tapes of the protagonist in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Gontarski has made a comparison between *Film* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and it seems that his opinion is largely justified:

Despite some stunning theoretical and technical achievements in *Film*, the work never quite coalesces. Beckett seems, almost at every stage of the creative process, to have engaged in a struggle with his referential, cognitive medium, from which he could not disentangle himself. The immediate rapport between artist and machine evident in the composition of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, for example, is missing in *Film*. (*The Intent*: 110)

Bouchard links the interpretation of O’s reaction to the photographs in “the context of Beckett’s interrogation of vision” (121) and concedes: “vision, now in the form of the still image of a photograph, is again rejected in its metaphysical role of providing a coherent image of personal history. In an effect analogous to that of the camera-eye, the photographic lens fragments the subject into seven, separate

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of that play from the point of view of “voluntary” and “involuntary” memory see Uchman 2012.

images. In the words of Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, 'the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity'"<sup>15</sup> (126).

A few words should now be devoted to the ending of the film. Having destroyed the photographs, still sitting in the rocking chair, He falls asleep, and then

E's gaze pierces the sleep, O starts awake, stares up at E. Patch over O's left eye now seen for the first time. Rock revived by start, stilled at once by foot to ground. Hand clutches the armrests. O half starts from the chair, then stiffens, staring up at E. Gradually that look. Cut to E, of whom this very first image (face only, against ground of tattered wall). It is O's face (with patch) but with very different expression, impossible to describe, neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute *intentness*. A big nail is visible near left temple (patch side). Long image of the unblinking eye. Cut back to O, still half risen, staring up, with that look. He covers his face with his hands. Image of O rocking, his head in his hands but not yet bowed. Cut back to E. As before. Cut back to O. He sits, bowed forward, his head in his hands, gently rocking. Hold it as the rocking dies down. (169)

The final moments are revealing in some respects. First of all, they make the viewer aware of the fact that E is none other than O — the perceived and the perceiver are the same person. The conclusion, then, is that existence lasts as long as self-perception does or, in other words, the only way of ending perception and existence can be found in complete annihilation (i.e. death). Does O, however, reach this seemingly blessed state? The answer to this question is not simple. On the one hand, looking at the prolonged process of Beckett's characters' dying, one can argue that the final solution cannot be reached that easily. On the other, however, if we take into account the rocking chair, it can be justifiably argued, it seems, that the final escape is possible, after all. When O first spots E, he immediately stills the chair by putting his foot to the ground. Then, however, he starts to rock again. Before the final blackout we notice that the rocking has died down. The image of a rocking chair appears again in Beckett's later play *Rockaby* (1981). In that short play, a "prematurely old" woman (273) is sitting in a chair, rocking and listening to her "*recorded voice*" (274). The rock is "*Slight. Slow. Controlled mechanically without assistance from w*" (274). Whenever the recorded voice becomes silent and the rocking stops, the woman says "More" (275, 276, 278 and 280). The play closes with the recorded voice saying:

So in the end  
Close of a long day went down [...].  
Right down  
Into the old rocker  
Those arms at last  
and rocked  
rocked  
with closed eyes  
closing eyes  
she so long all eyes  
famished eyes

<sup>15</sup> R. Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1981: 12.

all sides  
 high and low  
 to and fro  
 at her window  
 to see  
 to be seen  
 till in the end  
 close of a long day  
 to herself  
 whom else  
 time she stopped  
 let down the blind and stopped  
 time she went down  
 down the steep stair'  
 time she went right down  
 was her own other  
 own other living soul  
 so in the end  
 close of a long day  
 went down  
 let down the blind and down  
 right down  
 into the old rocker  
 and rocked  
 rocked  
 saying to herself  
 no  
 done with that  
 the rocker  
 those arms at last  
 saying to the rocker  
 rock her off  
 stop her eyes  
 fuck life  
 stop her eyes  
 rock her off  
 rock her off

[*Together: echo of 'rock her off', coming to rest of rock, slow fade out.*] (281–282)

On the one hand, the similarities between *Film* and *Rockaby* are, indeed, striking: the rocking chair finally coming to a stop, the eyes, the others who are, potentially, looking, the wish to stop being perceived (also by oneself) finally, die. The endings of both works are also very similar - in both cases they are inconclusive. Do they finally end or will a repetition follow?

Even though *Rockaby* makes reference to the other/or oneself who is perceiving, it does not include a reference to the other component of Berkeley's philosophy, namely God. It must be stressed, however, that the latter's doctrine of *esse est percipi*, which was meant to be proof for God's existence, was treated by Beckett

in a slightly ironic way. Kalb argues that some critics “suggest that Beckett intends to give a religious maxim an atheistic twist” (136), an opinion that merits closer inspection. In *Film* there is an image of God hanging on the wall. O does not notice it, until safely seated in the rocking chair. He then gets a glimpse of “the face of God the Father, the eyes staring at him severely. He sets down case on the floor to his left, gets up and inspects Insistent image on the wall, tears it in four, throws down the pieces and grinds them underfoot” (167). A very specific picture was used: “the photograph of the head with large eye sockets that is pinned to the wall, suggested by Avignor Arikha, was a reproduction of a Sumerian head of the god Abu in the museum in Baghdad” (Knowlson 1996: 465). This image with its terrifying, protruding eyes, is shown in a more vehement way than the others, which might be an indication of a rejection of the very idea of God. Bignell’s argument seems to support such a reading:

Film’s subject could be described as the effect of the lack of God’s authority as perceiver, as author of Being, and thus *Film* works as a displacement of Berkeley. The notion of displacement appears in the structure of *Film*, since we see that without God to guarantee perception, the authority for being is displaced onto the individual O, and the visual technologies which represent him to himself. *Film* divides the individual into perceiver and perceived, but shows that self as subject and self as object must co-exist in the state of being. Being is inescapably split in itself, as Sylvie Debevec Henning’s essay on *Film* points out: “all perception requires two and this is true even of apperception. Hence there can never be full unity of the self, nor any perfect self-identity [...]”<sup>16</sup>

Many different critical opinions have been voiced concerning the concept and the artistic realization of *Film*. For instance, Casanova has written:

The transformation of a technical philosophical proposition into a (virtually) narrative film of pursuit featuring Buster Keaton is of the same order as his attempts to undermine literary proprieties. In ironic and formal fashion, Beckett proceeds to overrun the self-evident narrative and realistic assumptions of cinema, inaugurating a new cinematographic ‘genre’: the speculative ‘drama’ and ‘thriller’. (70)

Beckett was often unwilling to provide a commentary on his work but he did in the case of *Film*. It seems fully justified to finish the discussion of this venture by quoting what the Nobel prize winner said. As for general opinion concerning *Film* Beckett stated, as reported by Ackerley and Gontarski:

SB was dissatisfied as he struggled with compromises his film demanded. He found portions of it powerful if “Not quite the way intended”; he told Rosset that it was an “interesting failure,” an opinion many share. The Berkeleyan framework, SB admitted to Schneider, is something “you and I and a few others can discern.” Despite his reservations it retains a power and mystery. Though not a commercial success it won festival awards in Venice, New York, and London (1965), and at Oberhausen, Tours, Sydney, and Kraków (1966). (195)

<sup>16</sup> S.D. Henning. „*Film*: A Dialogue Between Beckett and Berkeley.” *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no 7 (Spring 1982): 89–99.

In 1976 Morton Feldman, an American composer and professor of music visited Beckett. He showed the playwright the score of music he had written for some lines from the script of *Film*. Showing interest in the music, Beckett said there was only one theme in his life.

“May I write it down?” [asked Feldman]. (Beckett himself takes Feldman’s music paper and writes down the theme [...]. It reads “To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable non-self.) [...] It would need a bit of work, wouldn’t it? Well, if I get any further ideas on it, I’ll send them on to you.”<sup>17</sup> (Knowlson 1996: 557)

The remark Beckett made to Feldman clearly shows the artist’s idea of the split human self — the inner and the outer shadows (the word highlighting the lack of the vision’s sharpness), both of which are unattainable. In this sense, it seems human identity cannot be precisely, or accurately, described. Neither other people nor the given person can know oneself. Beckett skillfully reworks the Berkeleyan concept of *esse est percipi*, which implies that to exist means to be perceived, and he argues that even if there is no external perceiver, man still exists because the subjective perception is still working. Taking the idea of the perceiver from Berkeley, the artist introduces the concept of self-perception and uses it in a specific way to present human life as a state of incessant suffering, a punishment for the “eternal sin of having been born.” An additional remark should also be made, namely that while other Beckettian characters often need to be noticed, accompanied, and listened to by others, *Film* concentrates on the character’s wish to stop being perceived by other people, since its protagonist is hoping that this will bring an end to his existence. This, however, does not happen, as the self-perception still exists. Thus, while Berkeley argues that existence depends on being perceived by someone, Beckett moves a step further and concentrates on the impossibility of ending life.

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