

Gilles Deleuze, 'The Greatest Irish Film', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

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The Greatest Irish Film (Beckett's "Film")

The Problem

If it is true, as the Irish Bishop Berkeley said, that to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*), is it possible to escape perception? How does one become imperceptible?¹

The History of the Problem

We might imagine that the whole story is that of Berkeley, who had enough of being perceived (and of perceiving). The role, which could only have been played by Buster Keaton, would be that of Bishop Berkeley. Or rather, it is the transition from one Irishman to another, from Berkeley who perceived and was perceived, to Beckett who had exhausted "all the joys of *percipere* and *percipi*."² We must therefore propose a cutting of the film (or a distinction of cases) that differs slightly from the one proposed by Beckett himself.

The Condition of the Problem

There must be something unbearable in the fact of being perceived. Is it the fact of being perceived by a third party? No, since possible perceiving third parties recoil once they realize they are being perceived, not simply by each other, but each one by himself. Thus there is something intrinsically terrifying in the fact of being perceived, but what?

The Givens of the Problem

As long as perception (the camera) is behind the character, it is not dangerous because it remains unconscious. It seizes the character only when it approaches him at an oblique angle and makes him conscious of being perceived. We will say, by convention, that the character becomes conscious of being perceived, that it “enters into *percipi*,” when the camera exceeds an angle of forty-five degrees behind the character’s back, from one side or the other.

The First Case: The Wall and the Staircase, Action

The character can limit the danger by walking quickly along a wall; in this way, he leaves only one side unprotected. To make a character walk along a wall is the first cinematographic act (all the great filmmakers have attempted it). Of course, the action is more complex when it becomes vertical and even spiral-like, as in a staircase, since the unprotected side alternates relative to the angle of view. In any case, whenever the forty-five-degree angle is surpassed, the character comes to a halt, stops the action, flattens himself against the wall, and hides the exposed side of his face with his hand, or with a handkerchief or cabbage leaf that could be drawn from his hat. Such is the first case, the perception of action, which can be neutralized by stopping the action.

The Second Case: The Room, Perception

This is the second cinematographic act: the interior, what takes place between the walls. Previously, the character was not considered to be perceiving: it was the camera that furnished him with a “blind” perception, sufficient to his action. But now the camera perceives the character in the room, and the character perceives the room: all perception becomes double. Previously, human third parties could potentially perceive the character, but they were neutralized by the camera. Now, the character perceives for himself, his perceptions become things that in turn perceive him: not only animals, mirrors, a *lithograph of the good Lord*, photos, but even utensils (as Eisenstein said after Dickens: the kettle is looking at me . . .). In this regard, things are more dangerous than human beings: I do not perceive them without

their perceiving me, all perception as such being the perception of perception. The solution to this second case consists in expelling the animals, veiling the mirror, covering the furniture, pulling down the lithograph, and tearing up the photos: the extinction of double perception. On the street, a bit earlier, the character still had a space-time at his disposal, and even fragments of a past (the photos he was carrying). In the room, he still had sufficient strength at his disposal to form images that would restore his perception. But now he has nothing but the present, in the form of a hermetically sealed room in which all ideas of space and time, all divine, human, or animal images, all images of things, have disappeared. All that remains is the Rocking Chair in the center of the room, because, more than any bed, it is the sole piece of furniture that exists before or after man, that which suspends us in the middle of nothingness (to-and-fro).

The Third Case: The Rocking Chair, Affection

The character was able to sit in the rocking chair and doze off only to the degree that the perceptions were extinguished. But perception still lies in wait behind the rocking chair, where it has both sides at its disposal simultaneously. And it seems to have lost the goodwill it manifested earlier, when it hurried to close off the angle it had inadvertently surpassed, protecting the character from potential third parties. Now it surpasses the angle deliberately, trying to surprise the dozing character. The character defends himself and curls up, ever more feebly. The camera perception takes advantage of this; it surpasses the angle definitively, turns around, faces the sleeping character, and draws near to him. It then reveals what it is: the perception of affection, that is, the perception of the self by itself, or pure Affect. It is the reflexive double of the convulsive man in the rocking chair. It is the one-eyed person who looks at the one-eyed character. It was waiting for the right moment. This, then, is what was so terrifying: that perception was the perception of the self by itself, “insuppressible” in this sense. This is the third cinematographic act, the close-up, the affect or the perception of affection, the perception of oneself. It too will be extinguished, but at the same time as the movement of the rocking chair stops and the character dies. Is this not precisely what is needed, to cease to be in order to become imperceptible, according to the conditions set forth by Bishop Berkeley?

The General Solution

Beckett's film traversed the three great elementary images of the cinema, those of action, perception, and affection. But nothing is ever finished in Beckett, nothing ever dies. When the rocking chair is immobilized, what is set in motion is the Platonic idea of the Rocking Chair, the rocking chair of the spirit. When the character dies, as Murphy said, it is because he has already begun to move in spirit. He is like a cork floating on a tempestuous ocean: he no longer moves, but is in an element that moves. Even the present has disappeared in its turn, in a void that no longer involves obscurity, in a becoming that no longer includes any conceivable change. The room has lost its partitions, and releases an atom into the luminous void, an impersonal yet singular atom that no longer has a Self by which it might distinguish itself from or merge with others. Becoming imperceptible is Life, "without cessation or condition" . . . attaining to a cosmic and spiritual lapping.