

# To see or not to see? That is one of the questions

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## Resumen

With his behaviour, Object – the main character in Samuel Beckett’s *Film* (1965) – aims to escape from everybody else’s gaze, and even from his own, according to George Berkeley’s core idea “to be is to be perceived”. This guiding thread will show us how perceptive subtraction implies as much of an escape as an alternative: by subtracting visual material, the subject endeavours to stay on the sidelines and to distance himself from what he perceives. With this, he tries to reach a degree zero where he will no longer be able to see and/or be seen, and from which he will be able to see and/or be anew. This radical rupture with what is given to perceive is repeated in art trends such as the Structural Film. Its vertiginous flicker of monochromes aims to refresh an exhausted gaze absorbed by the media. This is the way the Benjaminian destructive character, known by the need for fresh air and open space”, operates as much in film structuralists as in Object. It is a way to take a breath and start anew.

**Palabras clave:** *Film*, perception, closing of the eyes, flicker, agency.

*Film* (1965), the only motion-picture written – and, somehow, also co-directed – by Samuel Beckett, seems to begin as the last part of another, much longer film. It is a rushed start where Buster Keaton appears on the scene from the left side of the screen and initiates action – a similar entry to the endings of certain plays by Shakespeare and Calderón, of which Walter Benjamin remembers how, repeatedly, “kings, princes, attendants and followers ‘enter, fleeing” (Benjamin, 1979: 100). At this moment, the spectators’ gaze brings the characters to a halt, containing their flight from the stage. In the same way Object – the name of the hero of the film, played by Keaton – is paralyzed by the public’s gaze, which – since we are in the world of cinema – is added to the camera’s gaze. Hardly anecdotal, this behaviour is continued in Object, who, throughout the whole film, is constantly protecting himself from other people’s gazes and even from his own, avoiding or removing any perceiving entity, trying to reach a zero degree of vision.



Photograph taken in the shooting of *Film* (1965)

We could interpret the leading role of *Film*, set in New York in 1929, shows the symptoms of the illness of the age: neurasthenia, also known as lack of interest in life, fatigue or tedium. Simmel (2004: 480) deems it typical of modernity and calls it “an emotional trait” that is inevitable in metropolitan life when the nervous system tries to manage the provocation of the throng and the over-stimulating chaos. Apparently, neurasthenia could be deemed as a necessary value in this context. However, Simmel also points out that there are extremely sensitive subjects, affected by hyperaesthesia or hypersensitivity, who are unable to manage such an amount and intensity of stimuli. In such individuals neurasthenia comes to an extreme and is pathologically deformed, giving rise to more serious cases, such as agoraphobia. This disorder, first defined in 1865 in Émile Littré and Charles Robin’s dictionary of medicine (1865: 30), appeared as “a form of madness consisting in an acute anxiety, with palpitations and fears of all kinds”. Later, by the end of the XIXth century, specialists would agree on defining it as the fear of big, open spaces. We would attribute this clinical picture to the main character of *Film*, knowing that one of the locations where the pathology can manifest is precisely along lengthy walls, such as the wall appearing in the beginning of the film. Among the researches who mention this is Gilles de la Tourette, who emphasizes this fact in his book *Les états neurasthéniques* (The neurasthenic states) (1898) when describing as agoraphobic those who feel impelled to crawl along the walls and skirt the buildings, thus trying to avoid open spaces. Similarly, in the beginning of the movie, the character Object creeps along the wall in order to feel the least vulnerable possible, keeping within the so-called “angle of immunity”. Only when the camera gaze exceeds 45 degrees in relation to Object’s position, does the character perceive it and he is paralyzed with horror before the presence of his pursuer. His peripheral vision keeps him persistently on alert before any perceptive intrusion in his field of vision. It follows that, as Ludwig Binswanger (1963) states, the patient believes to live in permanent danger and feels lost in a reality that is equivalent to a vast, hostile space. Julien Guadet (1890: 430) adds to this that the agoraphobic’s gait keeps the concentration of someone who seems to be at life risk. That is precisely the order specified by Beckett in the script of *Film*, by which Keaton must maintain an “acute intentness”.

The threat from which Object tries to protect himself is not an aggression, not even an attempt of physical contact. What the leading role of Film is really afraid of is being perceived – in this aspect, Samuel Beckett follows the core idea by George Berkeley (Irish bishop of the XVIIth century) that “To be is to be perceived” (*Esse est percipi*) in such a way that, as the film progresses, Object becomes gradually aware of several perceiving entities. The feeling of being perceived by others, by animals, by things, by god, even by himself, manifests as the origin of a strong dislike. If – in Benjamin’s words – “To be happy is to be able to become aware of oneself without fright” (Benjamin, 1979: 71), we can imagine that the character played by Keaton has been born “under the sign of Saturn”. This origin – says Susan Sontag – identifies one whose “true impulse when one is being looked at is to cast down one’s eyes, look in a corner” (Sontag, 1981:128). The expression “cast down one’s eyes” brings to our memory the title of Martin Jay’s book *Downcast Eyes* (1993), where the author shows a certain tendency to reject the visual and the oculo-centric tradition, particularly from the XXth century onwards. Incidentally, this is in line with Beckett’s leading character.

Leaving aside the visual level, Film can be considered a silent movie, except for the “shhh” that tells us to shut up in the first part. It is therefore a quite silent movie, which only sound reminds us of the state of things. In these circumstances we can borrow the monologue by the main character of Luigi Pirandello’s *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (*One, no One and One Hundred Thousand*) and put it in Object’s mouth. It says:

“The idea that the others saw someone in me who was not the someone I knew myself, someone who only they could know, looking at me from outside with eyes that were not mine and that gave me an appearance destined to always be an outsider to myself, despite being within myself, despite being mine for them (a ‘mine’, therefore, that was not for me!); a life in which, despite being mine for them, I couldn’t penetrate. This idea, as I said, would not give me respite. How could I bear this outsider inside me? This outsider that I was for myself? How could I live without seeing him? Without knowing him? How could I remain forever doomed to carrying him with me, inside me, visible to others and beyond my vision?” (Pirandello, 2004: 27).

Pirandello transfers to this character the same estrangement that the actor has before a film camera; he analyses this in his novel *Si gira* (*Shoot!*) (1915), which he would later republish under the title *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (*The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*) (1925). In accordance with this, in Keaton’s figure there is a double estrangement: both of the character toward his surroundings and of the character himself toward the camera. Benjamin identifies this other level in the film – that of the actor while he is acting – as akin to “the estrangement felt before one’s appearance [*Erscheinung*] in a mirror”. We can take it further, then, and imagine that Object also plays, in his turn, the film actor aware that his image is directly transported to the public. As Benjamin states, “While he is standing in front of the apparatus, he knows that in the end he is confronting the masses” (Benjamin, 2002: 113). Object might be fully aware of this, that a public of consumers does the same: it consumes him.



Eye and Object characters in *Film*

In his flight from any kind of gaze, Object even tries to flee from his own. His self-perception is represented by Eye, the other leading role of the film, played by the same actor, Keaton, and characterized exactly like the first. But it is precisely from Eye – from his own gaze – that Object cannot escape. In the 1970s, John Cage undertook a similar exercise in which he came to experience the impossibility of silence. In an anechoic, soundproof chamber – as far as the technical possibilities of the time would allow –, Cage isolated himself with the aim of perceiving absolute silence. The result was rather that he could not cease to make out two sounds: one low-pitched (corresponding to his circulatory system) and one higher-pitched (related to his nervous system). The artist therefore concluded that silence is impossible, to the extent that it is inevitable to hear oneself. In the same sense, Eye cannot help perceiving Object, and Object cannot help feeling perceived – therefore, he does not cease to exist.



Man with a Movie Camera (1929), Dziga Vertov

This twin character, Eye – who remains invisible since his location coincides with the lens of the filming camera –, finally appears on the scene in the final part of the movie. The trinity of points of view comprised of the public, the camera and this character splits off at this moment, leaving the camera's and the public's position unaltered. It is then that we realize that a prior division has taken place between Object and Eye – who are, in fact, the same, played by a single actor, albeit with different attitudes. This brings us back to a circumstance of the period when it was shot (the beginning of the XXth century): the new modern type of worker tended to develop a 'second' consciousness. In his work *Über den Schmerz* (On Pain), Ernst Jünger writes that this new consciousness corresponds with "the person standing outside the zone of pain" (Jünger, 1995: 70). This would present a distance between a concerned consciousness, that suffers the incidents and the aggressions of the modern environment (Object) and, in turn, another, distanced, one, which does not let itself be affected by the environment (Eye). Jünger reinforces the possible comparison of the second consciousness with Eye's character when he relates it with photography, which "artificial eye", "insensitive and invulnerable", is able to register "equally well a bullet in mid-air or the moments in which a man is torn apart by an explosion" (Jünger 1989: 208). Hence, if the new modern subject's double consciousness consists of a first, 'suffering' (as a sick individual), and a second, 'impassive' (as an alienated individual); they would coincide with those played by the two Keatons in the last scene. On his part, Kracauer relates this impassivity (anticipated by his master's Simmel's typology of the blasé) with a form of "becoming a machine, to register the phenomena with and 'incorruptible' and 'precise' gaze" [1], according to Claudia Krebs (2008: 183), which is precisely what the overlap of Eye and the camera show in Film. It may be that Beckett wanted to make a criticism or some sort of warning by making the spectator occupy the position of the impassible. Nevertheless, we must also bear in mind that, despite the fact that the second consciousness, Eye, does not make contact with his environment, he is still able to perceive the elements around him and to manage in the world without the difficulties of the first, Object. Surely because the attitude of the impassible or blasé (in the same line as neurasthenia) also entails the materialization of a defence against the psychological intrusion suffered by the individual in the over-stimulating environment of the metropolis.

Seen from a Benjaminian point of view, Film can in turn be analysed from the perspective of the aura. In this case, we observe how Object gives every object around him the power to look back to him. This is as much as bestowing an aura on all that – once perceived – can play, in turn, its role as a perceiving entity. In the final version of the essay on "The work of art" [2], Benjamin considers that, in cinema, "the prop, in its turn, not infrequently functions as actor", and also that "each and every prop in a film may perform decisive functions" (Benjamin 2002: 126, note 21). Therefore, for him, inanimate objects enter the scene as much as actors do. On this basis, he states that "Film is thus the first artistic medium which is able to show how matter plays havoc with human beings. It follows that films can be an excellent means of materialist exposition" (Benjamin 2002: 126, note 21). It is a conclusion that Beckett has put to work in this movie.



*Eye* (1999), Rosemarie Trockel

But if there is anything that runs through this film from beginning to end is obsession, on the part of the principal actor – obsessed by the mere fact of being seen – and Beckett himself – obsessed by the organ of vision. In fact, Film was initially intended to be called *The Eye*. The first and the last background images behind the film credits pay tribute to this discarded name: an eye – Buster Keaton’s – looking straight into the lens in extreme close up shot (that is, looking at us) and blinking occasionally. Alan Schneider, the debutant and ‘official’ director of the film, recounts: “We had decided, once the original opening sequence was eliminated, that we would open with a huge menacing close-up of an eye held as long as possible [...] and then cut to Keaton running along the wall.” (Schneider, in Wulf 1995: 37) [3] [4]] . This kind of introduction, centred in the organ of vision, can be related to two opposed contemporary audiovisual works: *Eye* (1999), by Rosemarie Trockel, and *Surface Tension* (1992 ), by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Eye* is part of a triptych comprised of three videos (*Eye*, *Sleepingpill*, and *Kinderplatz*) that Trockel made for the 1999 Venice Biennale. In it, a fixed shot portrays an eye occupying the whole surface of the screen and moving constantly. This, in turn, is not a single eye, but is transformed from one type of eye to another, always occupying the same location and exact dimensions in the projection. Nevertheless, all in this work is in flux, from the eye itself to the gaze, which is never still. This is why the spectator standing before the work will have no chance to recognize himself/herself, but will go unnoticed, ignored by the colossal eye. In this respect, Christine Ross explains that the spectator’s eye itself “has been absorbed into the screen. But if this is so, it is under the action of technology: it is the camera that ingests and re-ingests the viewer it seeks to preserve. The camera has been endowed with a subjectivity that supports a phantasm of absorption, of losing one’s sense of self - one’s identity - by technological ingestion” (Ross, 2001: 92). If we take this point of view, Trockel’s screen acts as a mirror for the public – or is, rather, a reflection of the public’s gaze. In this work, according to Ross, the monocular viewpoint of Renaissance perspective disappears; it merges with the vanishing point and collapses in one single point. This brings her to the conclusion that Trockel’s *Eye* presents how subjectivity or agency falls on the side of technology and not on the side of vision – in this case, absorbed – of the human being. If we now return to Film, *Eye*, the perceiving part of Keaton, is in this case incorporated into the technical dimension; but the other part, Object, does not cease in his

endeavour to deny that immersion, fighting for his agency and his right not to see, even at the cost of disappearing. We can therefore define the plot of the film as an object's search to become a subject. Despite all, Object does not cease to demonstrate that he is an awakened eye that wields its decision-making power regarding his perceptual status and that is aware at all times, or maybe hypersensitive in relation to the gazes and the forms of power that cross around him. In this sense, Object overcomes Subject in subjectivity.



*Surface Tension* (1992), Rafael Lozano Hemmer

At the opposite extreme to Trockel's work, Lozano-Hemmer's *Surface Tension* (1992), although apparently very similar to *Eye*, represents a single eye that chases the spectator's figure before the screen. It all seems to point to the eye of the technical image, the persecutor who seeks to absorb gazes such as Trockel's. This is an attitude that we can well associate with a type of Hollywood or commercial cinema where the scheme of absorption and the absorbed comes into play. Moreover, if we would like to make a portrait of that cinema, we would only have to confront Trockel's *Eye* with Lozano-Hemmer's *Surface Tension* so that they would feed each other back. When the eye in *Surface Tension* would chase the eye in *Eye* and would make the same movements, the collapse previously described by Christine Ross would occur between the focal point and the vanishing point.

To conclude, Ross asks: "if the viewpoint has been absorbed by the camera - a hypothesis that refers directly to the present development of immersion and surveillance technologies - and if perspectival distancing has expired, how can visual perception be productive?" (Ross, 2001: 92-93). The truth is that there are alternatives to this situation and, in this sense, *Film* offers a possibility. From the very beginning of the movie, a cue appears. Just at the centre of the pupil of the big eye that precedes the action, a sort of cloud appears, a translucent veil covering the pupil. It may be that Beckett is anticipating with it the character's voluntary blindness, but a blindness that is specific in that it hints not at the fact of seeing, but at being seen – and therefore aspires to the blindness of others. Whilst *Eye* is absorbed from the beginning by the technical gaze, the character Object spends the whole film trying to free himself from the gaze of others, trying to escape at all costs. He thus aspires to reach a zero degree, both perceptual and vital, since "To be is to be perceived". It is a sort of suicide while alive which, far

from setting a final end, allows for a new start, free from former constrictions and prearranged fixations.



*Film* (1965), Samuel Beckett

From the beginning of the film, where Object runs away in terror, to where he ends up rocked in a chair, the rhythm declines gradually. Broadly speaking, we can observe that this deceleration contributes to a much less hurried gaze, but also to an interrupted gaze. In the same way that one takes the pulse to see if someone is already dead, Keaton covers his eyes to cease to feel himself. Not very far from the time when the film is set, in the 1940s, the ophthalmologist William Bates devised a set of exercises to recover vision without resorting to artificial elements such as glasses or surgical operations. Among the most salient exercises is a technique of passive relaxation: 'palming'. It consists in closing one's eyes and covering them with the palms of one's hands, carefully avoiding to press the eyeballs. Bates thus invites us to disconnect from visual reality, to concentrate on the deep black and rest the sight because, according to him, with this manoeuvre all the sensory nerves become relaxed. Another most recommended exercise is blinking: a dynamic relaxation technique where we are invited to close and open the eyes rapidly in a brief time lapse, with the aim of lubricating and cleaning them and, in passing, 'refreshing' the gaze. This brings to mind the repeated blinking at the beginning of *Film*, as well as the Object's repetitive 'palming' when he encounters Eye.

Bearing in mind that Object lives avoiding gazes or warding off the perceiving elements around him, we can somehow deduce that he inhabits between a constant closing of open eyes. Insofar as the leading character notices – and makes us notice – the gazes that he cancels soon thereafter, *Film* is equivalent to a sort of continuous flicker. In the 1960s, many works of abstract cinema were radical endeavours to get closer to the essence of the phenomenon of cinema. Among them, the Structural Film stands out as a cinema that – in the same way as Object – eschews narrative absorption, the spectator's empathy

with the actor and emotional implication, that prevent any attempt of separation between the public and the film work. Thus, structuralists attempted to draw a split that would prevent any identification with the film, breaking preconceived schemes in the public and forcing it to reconsider the present situation. In this way, paradigmatic works such as *Arnulf Rainer* by Peter Kubelka, *The Flicker* by Tony Conrad, and *Ray Gun Virus* by Paul Sharits conform a kind of flicker consisting of a constant stream of black and white frames or of constantly commuting monochrome shots. These images are not only projected, but are bombarded onto the spectator, imposing on him/her a constant questioning of the visual scene. Thanks to the destruction of the narrative – as Benjamin said about the destructive character – the spectator then “sees ways everywhere” (1978: 159). This Benjaminian trait which goal is to make room, to clear up, can be observed in the attitude of Beckett’s main character. If, as Benjamin says, this character “sees no image hovering before him” (p. 346), then “[n]o moment can know what the next will bring”. (p. 159). This is to say that, like *Object*, the destructive character also covers its eyes.



Screening of the film *The Flicker* (1966) de Tony Conrad

The Structural Film, in its role as radical culture, incorporates the materialist spirit that Benjamin formerly situated in the cinema by Chaplin and by Soviet directors like Eisenstein, developing other codes from the very foundations of cinema. Sarah Mulvey points out that the first great blow to the traditional convention of film on the part of the most radical directors was “to free the look of the camera into the materiality of time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment” (Mulvey, 2006: 190). The flicker in these structuralist works, just like the continuous play between seeing and concealing in Beckett’s film, aims to dissolve the dominant perceptual automatizations and to refresh a gaze able to avoid lures and see something different. Narrative and perceptual suppression becomes a way of working in a space off-camera where the image – and the gaze, in turn – can be reframed. A place where it becomes possible to eschew an unwanted form of existence and be anew. A place from which, very likely, after some time, it will be necessary to blink again.

\*Nota: salvo que se indique la referencia de una edición en español, todas las traducciones son de la autora.

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## Footnotes

[1] In the French original, "de devenir appareil, pour enregistrer les phénomènes, d'un regard 'incorruptible' et 'précis'".

[2] We are shortening the full name of the essay: "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction".

[3] Samuel Beckett's *Film: Complete scenario, illustrations, production shots* (1969) includes an essay by Alan Schneider: "On directing *Film*" (pp. 9-61), New York, Grove Press.

[4] The present quote is taken from Schneider's text in Catharina Wulf's edition (1995).  
[Translator's note].