

# **From Samuel Beckett's Film to Three Late Plays. A Distillation Towards an Essence**

Inés Toharia Terán

Máster en Estudios Literarios  
y Culturales Británicos y de los Países  
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**From Samuel Beckett's *Film* to Three Late Plays.**

A Distillation Towards an Essence.

Inés Toharia Terán

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Directora:

Prof. Antonia Rodríguez Gago

Máster Universitario en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Británicos y de los  
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“Tragedy is a close-up; comedy, a long shot”  
– Buster Keaton

“I am, I do and I suffer”  
– James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake*)

“if some thing could be perceived by various senses, it should be offered to all of them [...] since the senses are the most faithful providers of memory”  
– Jan Amos Komenský ‘Comenius’

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## I. Introduction

- Background

This paper focuses on *Film* (1964), Samuel Beckett's (b.1906-d.1989) only screenplay and cinema experience, to highlight its influence in conceiving and achieving a very striking visual staging in his late plays: *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1975) and *Rockaby* (1980). *Film* and its pervading effect, therefore, guides this study to see how its imprint might be traced in these three plays.

- Status of Research

Due to the restoration process of Beckett's *Film*, which concluded in 2011, the outtakes of its lost and incomplete opening scene were found. Almost fifty years earlier, while shooting *Film*, Beckett had preferred to remove the whole scene rather than to rewrite, reshoot or use parts of what had already been filmed. Giving up on this long street scene that Beckett had carefully written, and for which a cast had already been assembled in New York City, is something we can regard as an extremely difficult decision. But Beckett consciously chose to omit the scene after an unsuccessful first shooting day. In this way, he does away with any excesses (namely, the introduction of a variety of characters and of street life that show up in the original screenplay) and achieves an austere setting that is more fitting to his intention. He thus avoids any distractions that would pull us away from the main action: how the camera (E) chases the protagonist (O) while O tries to hide away from E and from any other possible source of perception (eyes—of all kinds—, street, staircase, door, window, mirror).

Samuel Beckett's work and life have been analysed in depth and to be able to watch images devised by him, discarded by him, and that were long thought to be missing, is very uncommon. It is under this new light that his work is studied.

The "kino-essay" *Notfilm*, made in 2015 by Ross Lipman, who located the lost footage of the street scene and worked on the restoration of *Film*, also provides a fresh approach to Beckett's world and, in this way, *Notfilm*<sup>1</sup> is referenced too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Notfilm* has a running time of 130 minutes and was released by Milestone Film & Video as a double DVD with an extra 85 minutes of bonus features.

Failing to achieve the complete opening scene in *Film* seems to be part of the Beckettian universe where failure is often enhanced as inevitable, as famously expressed in his late novella *Worstward Ho* (1983): “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (7). And it is while ‘trying again’ (i.e. when Samuel Beckett resumes his writing after the *Film* experience) that the author appears to have driven the visual imagery to an extreme in his following writing and in an intentional search for abstraction, as he himself humbly suggests in an interview published in 1969: “I think perhaps I have freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I have turned toward an abstract language” (Albright 16n. 169).<sup>2</sup>

- Problem statement

This paper proposes that, by having chosen to discard part of *Film*’s original screenplay, Samuel Beckett decidedly plunged into further exploring the visuals in his work, for it appears to have triggered his interest in getting closer to the minimal. After all, *Film* is itself a visual exploration and Beckett had expressed the idea of wanting to achieve in it an ‘almost abstract’ setting.

*Film* was commissioned by Barney Rosset, who was not only Beckett’s publisher in the United States (Grove Press), but also responsible for publishing landmark works such as Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, or Che Guevara’s *The Bolivian Diaries*. Rosset, who had defied mainstream culture and American censorship, secretly recorded on audio tape the previous production meetings held in New York that gave way to *Film*. It is due to this that we can now listen to Beckett explain and describe in his own words his concept and ideal setting for *Film* in the following way: “To me it’s not unimportant. It’s a kind of absolute street, absolute exterior, absolute transition—if there is such a thing—and an absolute interior. I mean, abstract almost”<sup>3</sup> (*Notfilm*).

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<sup>2</sup> Cited by Albright from John Gruen’s interview with Beckett in *Vogue*, December 1969, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> The quote is a transcription of the audio recordings of the pre-production meetings held between Samuel Beckett, Alan Schneider and Boris Kaufman at Barney Rosset’s summer home in East Hampton (Long Island). Rosset had kept these recordings and the film outtakes of the opening street scene in his New York apartment. They were employed by Ross Lipman in the kino-essay *Notfilm*.

As Beckett explains his visual ideas, he is also referring to the three physical settings in *Film* where the action takes place:

	<i>As seen in 'Film'</i> (1964)	<i>As printed in the screenplay</i> (Beckett's writing)	<i>As in the audio recording</i> (Beckett's voice)
[0]	[Close-up of O's eye]	---	---
1	Wall (Exterior)	"The street"	"Absolute exterior"
2	Building / Staircase (Exterior-Interior)	"The stairs"	"Absolute transition"
3	Apartment (Interior)	"The room"	"Absolute interior"
[4]	[Close-up of O's eye]	---	---

The three settings (or 'acts') in the filmed version of *Film*—what was finally shot, edited and screened—resemble the staging of the late plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*:

- *Not I* shows a mouth talking (Mouth) and a silent hooded figure (Auditor) listening (an ear), while the very beginning of *Film*—right before it dissolves into the brick wall—, as well as its ending, show an extreme close-up of an eye looking straight at us (audience) and blinking for, as Schneider recounts: "we had decided, once the original opening sequence was eliminated, that we would open with a huge menacing close-up of an eye" (par. 41);

- *Footfalls* shows its main character slowly walking along the stage, on a narrow "strip" of light, while *Film* shows its main character (O) rapidly walking along a brick wall "at street edge of wide sidewalk" (Beckett *CDW*, 324). O later goes up a staircase and ends up confining himself in a room, while in *Footfalls* the main character is trapped onstage, unable to escape from her walk;

- *Rockaby* shows its main character rocking herself on a rocking chair, while *Film* closes with its main character covering his face, "gently rocking" himself on a rocking chair and the screenplay closes with: "Hold it as the rocking dies down" (329).

*Film* can indeed be regarded as a previous visual experiment that gave shape to these plays. Its experience also appears to have helped Beckett in concentrating all the action on a single main character, for O gains prominence in *Film* by being so alone.

This paper seeks to analyse the way in which these three late plays manage to conjure up three lonely ‘icons’ that Beckett carefully paints with light and sculpts with words, staging a portrait of three Caravaggio-esque women who, as we behold them, are slowly fading away in their chiaroscuro, trapped on a desolate black and white stage that is somehow reminiscent of *Film*, where the main character had locked himself up in a greyish room attempting to elude perception. However, props have completely disappeared in the three plays, whereas *Film* shows other ‘objects’, both animate (people and animals) and inanimate (building, briefcase, flowers, rocking chair, couch, curtain, table, mirror, rug, cage, goldfish bowl, printed image of God Abu<sup>4</sup>, folder, photographs). It is also revealing that the main character in *Film* is himself named O, after Object. He is clearly the Object of an experiment or of a philosophical concept, as well as the victim (or target) of a relentless pursuit, very much in the spirit of a silent black and white comedy, as Ross Lipman suggests in *Notfilm*.

All three plays rely heavily on the use of light and darkness, as well as on the characters’ appearance, which is combined with their words, movements and sounds to produce an overall aesthetic reaction in the audience (or, even, reader). The lack of action and of props is compensated by the powerful images Beckett creates. The plays visually explain themselves in the same way a painting, a photograph or a silent film might do. The words contribute to the play but are secondary to the visuals. Beckett seems to be appealing to our senses and feelings, rather than to an intellect that would only be searching for meaning. This was probably the idea behind *Film* too, where no words are heard—it is mainly a silent film, with the exception of a single hushing sound—but sight (perception) is intentionally emphasised instead.

The purpose, in this way, is to follow Beckett’s intention of focusing on the very essentials in *Film* and, by this, to prove how he managed to achieve in his later work a visually effective yet minimal mise-en-scène that can be linked to the gruelling experience of making *Film*.

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<sup>4</sup> “The photograph of the head with large eye sockets that is pinned to the wall [...] was a reproduction of a Sumerian head of God Abu in the Museum of Baghdad” (Knowlson 523).

In the outtakes from *Notfilm* Samuel Beckett's biographer, James Knowlson, expresses this very idea when he puts forward that Beckett, as he ages, might be distilling from his early work "a sort of essence":

[Beckett] saw old age as something which was leading him to the essence. His early work is brilliant, it's extraordinary, extravagant and erudite. But towards the end you really do have that distillation of a sort of essence. His late work is the combination of everything that he has done before. And it is a distillation, and there is a light, and there is a profundity.<sup>5</sup> (*Notfilm*)

Interestingly, in his late plays Beckett conveys this "distillation" via his ageing characters, who appear to be slowly wilting under the light. They seem to be growing old with their author while they also embody, as Knowlson puts it, "the combination of everything that [Beckett] has done before." Ironically, light is what allows perception and it is light what reveals the characters' life on a stage or in a film. Light stands for existence but it also shows the existential web in which the characters are entangled in the same way as the camera (E) follows O in *Film* and reveals his existence. This becomes especially relevant when we consider George Berkeley's premise: "esse est percipi" (to be is to be perceived), which Beckett explicitly employs in *Film*.

In the end, a struggle between darkness and light is put forward by Beckett in his exploration of perceivedness and of 'being,' and it is in the grey areas and under dim light where the characters attempt to 'fail better' or to (unsuccessfully) move on.

- Outline

The paper is divided into five chapters, including this Introduction. Chapter II studies *Film* while Chapter III explores the three late plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*; Chapter IV deals with the imagery Beckett creates onstage after the experience of *Film* and Chapter V draws some conclusions from the research.

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<sup>5</sup> From the interview *James Knowlson in conversation with Ross Lipman (Outtakes from Notfilm)*, included in the Extras DVD of *Notfilm* (2015).



## II. Beckett's *Film*

The chronological order in which Samuel Beckett wrote his work indicates how the author's mindset and intentions in his recently completed piece might have led him to focus further on those ideas, concepts and mood when working on his next project. It is like an experimental learning curve, where he incorporates what he reaps from the challenges he confronts. *Film* remains Beckett's only experience in filmmaking but soon after making *Film* (written in 1963, filmed in 1964 and first shown publicly in 1965) he conceived *Eh Joe* (written in 1965), the first of his TV plays, which he wrote specifically for the television medium. Joe resembles O: he is a man trapped in a room who is haunted by his past and by a crucial moment of his existence. The room in *Eh Joe* is similar to the one in *Film*: it displays a concealed window, door and cupboard (all three covered by drawn curtains); while in *Film* O carefully covers the window and mirror, and locks the door. Joe is first seen from behind and the camera pursues him, just as E pursues O from behind.

There is no doubt that Beckett's encounter with the audiovisual language made him further experiment in his dramatic work and it must have contributed in devising his imagery to such an extent that, as Oppenheim points out:

the imposing theatre images, more than those of any other playwright of the twentieth century, continually renew our appreciation for play writing as a far more visual than verbal art (158) [...] [Beckett's] plays [...] are in themselves images observed. (160)

It is worth noticing too that Beckett wrote *Film* shortly after *Play*, “a play in one act” for which he had employed another self-descriptive title. Many critics point out that *Play* signals a transition in the aesthetics of Beckett's drama. S. E. Gontarski calls it “a pivotal play in his developing sensibility” (132) and claims that Beckett's emphasis on performance in *Play* is also what prompted Beckett to take full charge of directing his work. Beckett writes extremely detailed scenic directions to guarantee the final look in his plays. His concern was expressed in 1984 when he said: “any production which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me” (Brater 30). However, he was also very involved in the rehearsals, in the translation of his texts into other languages, and in the pre-production process—as can be gathered from the production meetings of *Film*. It makes

sense that he would gladly take the director's seat in his work whenever possible. Alan Schneider, the future director of *Film*, acknowledges this when he recalls Beckett's involvement in the film, which was made in the heyday of the influential French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*), the reason for which Schneider alludes to auteur theory in his recollection:

With every new wavelet of contemporary cinema turning directors, in effect, into authors, it took the surprising author of *Film*, playwright Samuel Beckett, to become, not too surprisingly, its real director. Not that I wasn't always around, red director's cap flying, riding the camera dolly, or telling Buster what to do. But, from original concept to final cut, it was the special vision and tone set by Sam which all of us were dedicated to putting on film. (Par. 1)

*Play* was written in late 1962-3, premiered in June, in Germany, and was first published in German (as *Spiel*) in July 1963. British and French productions occurred simultaneously in 1964, after numerous text revisions by Beckett. Around that same time, *Film* came into being

In February 1963, Barney Rosset visited Beckett in Paris where he offered to commission a thirty-minute film that would be part of a film project for Evergreen Theatre in which he also commissioned scripts from Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter (Knowlson 505-6). Only Beckett would go on to complete his film. Had the whole project been achieved, it would certainly have set a milestone in avant-garde drama and film, and in exploring the possibilities of crossing over from both realms.

Beckett wrote his first draft of the screenplay in April 1963 and showed it to Alan Schneider in May. In June Beckett and Schneider travelled to Germany to oversee the rehearsals of *Play*. The influence of the German experience (and of *Play*) is relevant when we analyse the aforementioned description Beckett gives to explain the setting for *Film*: "absolute street, absolute exterior, absolute transition [...] absolute interior [...] abstract almost" (*Notfilm*). In Beckett's search for abstraction, he repeatedly employs the term "absolute." In addition, throughout his work humour abounds to depict human existence and in his screenplay Beckett describes the "climate" of the film as "comic and unreal" (CDW, 323). It is, therefore, no surprise that Buster Keaton was picked to play the main part in *Film*—though it was Charlie Chaplin who had been previously considered for the

role. In their own way, both silent film stars embody the combination of tragedy and comedy that Beckett's work also conveys. By choosing the term "absolute" to explain the setting of *Film* Beckett could very probably be alluding, at least in the back of his mind, to an anecdote registered by actress Nancy Illig when she first met Beckett during his trip to Germany in 1963, when *Play* premiered and where she played the role of Woman 1. *Play* displays three "grey urns" onstage and from each urn a head protrudes: that of Woman 1, Woman 2 and Man. The three actors seem to be in a limbo but go on talking inside their respective urns. In Illig's words:

we struggled with [Beckett's] texts, which we weren't able to understand. The actor of the Man desperately threw his question out into the darkness of the auditorium: "Why am I dead?" The author seemed startled. He made various suggestions [...] Obviously, the question was not a relevant one for Beckett. When the actor insisted on knowing, Beckett said to Mendel<sup>6</sup> with a smirk: "*The Absolute Camel*." This referred to a joke both were familiar with which goes something like this: If an Englishman writes about a camel, he will use the title *A Camel*; a Frenchman will call it *The Camel and Love*; and a German, *The Absolute Camel*. The only thing important to Beckett was the situation: they were all three dead. (Ben-Zvi 24)

Illig's recollection, therefore, hints at why Beckett might have had at that time the "absolute" in his mind as a concept, given that the premiere of *Play* in Germany and the conception of *Film* coincide in time. "Absolute" is humorous in the context of Illig's anecdote: why is a talking head inside an urn dead? Is it at all relevant for the actor playing the Man? But it can also stand for deep interpretations, as "absolute," when applied to Germany, resounds of the philosophical theory of 'absolute' idealism associated to the German philosophers Hegel and Schelling which, in turn, was an answer to German idealism and Kant's transcendental idealism which had been preceded by the Irish philosopher George Berkeley's subjective idealism, whose main argument "to be is to be perceived" opens the screenplay of Beckett's *Film*. Berkeley's premise can thus suggest that *Film* may be regarded as a visual study of human existence in an 'almost abstract' setting, where the impossibility to escape existence ('to be') is made manifest: if Object is not perceived by Subject, Object is still perceived by Object (by one's self: one's 'I'), or

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<sup>6</sup> Deryk Mendel, *Play*'s stage director in Ulm and Samuel Beckett's friend. He was a director, actor, dancer and choreographer.

even, in Bishop Berkeley's universe, by God's ever-present 'eye.' The sign of existence is 'to be seen' and theatre, as well as film, is the perfect medium to show this.

It is very probable that German philosophy was in Beckett's mind when he was developing *Film*. Knowlson mentions his poems and prose show an impressive knowledge of German literature and thought (Knowlson 226) and he was an avid reader of Arthur Schopenhauer "who continued to influence [Beckett's] outlook, providing a clear justification for his view that suffering is the norm in human life, that will represents an unwelcome intrusion, and that real consciousness lies beyond human understanding" (268). *Film* indeed shows a suffering character who is unable to dodge his pursuer despite his willingness to avoid perception (will does not prevail), and E's gaze reveals an unexplainable consciousness: O's self-awareness.

It is quite relevant that, at the time when Beckett was shooting *Film*, he was suffering from cataracts and his vision had changed. The connection is further explained in *Notfilm*, where Beckett's failing vision is linked to establishing the two points of view in *Film*, i.e. what E sees and what O sees, or in Beckett's words, "visual appetite and visual distaste" with the added complication that "O never sees anything acutely" (*Notfilm*)<sup>7</sup>:

he had problems with his own blurred vision through his cataracts so that this was something which was not just a philosophical concern of Beckett but a practical reason for being interested in vision. [...] For Beckett at the time of production distortion was the norm. The challenge was establishing two distinct distortions expressed through cinematic form.<sup>8</sup> (*Notfilm*)

This change in his eyesight appears to have contributed to his idea of abstraction and of exploring perception in his visual work. James Joyce had suffered from failing vision too—which is why he named his daughter Lucia, after the patron saint of the blind—and wore an eye-patch over his left eye. Beckett must have had his mentor's appearance in mind for the characterisation of O, as Buster Keaton also wears an eye-patch over his left eye in *Film*. In Oppenheim's words:

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Beckett's voice, from the audio recordings of *Film*'s production meetings. An edited version of these meetings is transcribed in S. E. Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> From James Knowlson's interview and Ross Lipman's voice-over in *Notfilm*.

All too familiar with the horror of deteriorating eyesight from his days, in the late 1930s, of reading to and performing various tasks for James Joyce, Beckett had sufficient reason to become increasingly obsessed with visual perception and visual memory as his own eyes began to fail him. (145)

A one-eyed protagonist could also be intentionally pointing at the desire of avoiding double vision (E + O) or, as Albright points out, the eye-patch might be suggesting the “monocularity of the camera itself” while it also brings to mind filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s “memorable image [...], a close-up in the Odessa steps scene of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), showing a woman shot through one eye, her pince-nez splintered by the bullet” (Albright 125-6). We may also recall Luis Buñuel’s famous scene in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929): as the clouds pass across the Moon, a man slides a razor through a woman’s eye. What is more, the Moon in Buñuel’s surreal short film resembles that of Georges Méliès’ *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), where a rocket lands right on the Moon’s eye. All three characters ‘lose’ an eye in memorable silent film scenes.

At the same time, the woman’s splintered pince-nez in *Battleship Potemkin* also comes to mind in *Film* when O encounters a couple as he walks along the brick wall: the man removes his own pince-nez to look at O, exchanges looks with the woman who, in turn, raises “a lorgnon to her eyes” (CDW 325) and then opens his mouth to be shushed by the woman. This is the only sound (‘sssh!’) that can be heard in the otherwise silent *Film*. After this, the couple stares at E with an open-mouthed expression, reminiscent of the woman’s countenance of horror in *Battleship Potemkin*, who also exclaims in a silent cry as blood runs down from her wounded eye. Such a silent cry may allude to the ‘only kind of form’ Beckett sees in his work, as he once recounted to Harold Pinter: “I was in hospital once. There was a man in another ward, dying of throat cancer. In the silence I could hear his screams continually. That’s the only kind of form my work has” (Prinz 168).

The Director of Photography in *Film* was Boris Kaufman, who had worked as cinematographer in highly regarded films such as *Zero for Conduct* (Dir. Jean Vigo, 1933), *On the Waterfront* (Dir. Elia Kazan, 1954) or *12 Angry Men* (Dir. Sidney Lumet, 1957). Kaufman was also the younger brother of notable Soviet filmmakers Dziga Vertov (Denis Kaufman) and Mikhail Kaufman. While devising *Film*’s look, Boris Kaufman shot a series of camera tests to convey O’s distorted or blurred vision by varying filters, using diffusion or by smearing Vaseline. Some of his tests can now be viewed in *Notfilm*, where Kaufman

can also be heard politely expressing his concerns about the concept of *Film*: “I must admit, I understand the intent more intuitively than rationally.”<sup>9</sup> However, Kaufman’s experiments to depict the differentiated points of view in *Film* were not employed as Beckett, again, preferred to simplify matters:

Despite the comments about both visions being diseased, in the end they did nothing technically to distort the shots from E’s perspective. Its sharpness becomes pronounced simply by contrast with O’s. [...] So the cinematic analogy for visual appetite becomes sharpness of focus.<sup>10</sup> (*Notfilm*)

In his screenplay Beckett had specified that “until end of film O is perceived by E from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°” (*CDW*, 323), what he calls the “angle of immunity” (329). And due to this, we can only gather in the end that “pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self” (323) when E finally fully confronts O and reveals that E is none other than O. In this confrontation E stands opposite from O, in the very position where the image of God had been pinned to the wall, and where only the nail now remains. Beckett specified this in his screenplay: “A big nail is visible near left temple (patch side)” (329). The big visible nail is open for interpretation: it might be a reminder of religion or of an ever-present God (as in Berkeley or as in religious beliefs); it might be an allusion to Christ’s nails on the cross and could, therefore, stand for suffering as an inevitable part of existence (as in Schopenhauer or as in Buddhism); it can also represent the audience looking straight at the speck of sawdust in our brother’s eye while we pay no attention to the plank in our own eye (as in Matthew 7:3, in the Bible) or it might be Beckett stating that the lack of sight (eye-patch) in one eye keeps O trapped between light and darkness: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light” (as in Matthew 6:22); and it could also be a reminder that we can never fully see things and are doomed to an illusion of life as we inevitably await death.

In *Notfilm*, Ross Lipman brings up the German concept of the doppelgänger (a ghostly double of a living person) as being present in *Film*, and applies this idea not only to E and O, but extends it to Samuel Beckett and Buster Keaton:

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<sup>9</sup> Transcribed from Boris Kaufman’s recorded voice in *Film*’s production meetings.

<sup>10</sup> Transcribed from Ross Lipman’s voice-over in *Notfilm*.

E is of course O's double image, his doppelgänger. In some traditions, encountering one's double is an omen of death, in others, of prophecy. In Beckett's early notebooks he considered accompanying *Film* with Schubert's "Der Doppelgänger." The flute player in the BFI remake<sup>11</sup> of *Film* [...] performs precisely this composition as E encounters O. For Beckett, the self is the path to both enlightenment and death. But the doppelgänger's overtones resonate further. It was also a fascination of Keaton's. Keaton's early gags, as archetypes themselves, reflect the very themes Beckett explored. [...] Keaton was in many ways Beckett's doppelgänger. A dourness underlay Keaton's humor as much as humor underlay Beckett's dourness. (*Notfilm*)

The confrontation between E and O (that in the end reveals E=O) echoes Juan Ramón Jiménez's untitled poem that opens with "I am not I." The poem's first line signals a negation of an 'I' and brings to mind both *Not I* and O's obsession not to be perceived. The poem can be seen hanging on a wall at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York City. Strasberg defined 'Method Acting' based on the theories of Konstantin Stanislavski and trained actors, such as Marilyn Monroe or James Dean. The core principle of the Lee Strasberg Method, according to the Strasberg Institute, is stated by Aristotle when he expressed that "the secret to moving the passions in others is to be moved oneself, and that moving oneself is made possible by bringing to the fore 'visions' of experiences from life that are no longer present" (*What is Method Acting* 2012). Beckett manages to move the audience too, but he does so by carefully staging what seem to be his own 'visions,' rather than by asking the actors to bring theirs 'to the fore' or by providing a rational or psychological context to a situation. Actress Billie Whitelaw summarises this when she explains: "the words that I've got scribbled all over my texts are: 'No color,' 'Don't act,' 'No emotion,' 'Just say it.' [...] I think when he says 'No color, No emotion,' he means, 'Don't act, for God's sake.'" (Kalb 234). Referring to *Enough* (which she read), and the plays *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, Whitelaw concludes: "I find doing them far more difficult, exhausting and emotionally draining than doing twelve hours a day of the Greeks at the Royal Shakespeare Company" (234). Indeed, in order to materialise his detailed mise-en-scène (or 'vision') Beckett mercilessly drives the actors to the limits in highly demanding performances and deliveries. He thus appears to prioritise the visceral. As

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<sup>11</sup> The British Film Institute remade *Film* in 1979 without Samuel Beckett's supervision. It was filmed in 16mm with sound and in colour, directed by D. R. Clark and with Max Wall as O.

recounted in *Notfilm*, “Billie Whitelaw suffered countless ailments as a result of her work with Beckett. She only half-jokingly asked him: ‘Is there anything you ever write for an actor that isn’t physically painful?’” (*Notfilm*).

In Jiménez’s poem (translated by poet Robert Bly), we might sense the duality of O/E, but in a much less sombre tone:

I am not I.

I am this one  
walking beside me whom I do not see,  
whom at times I manage to visit,  
and whom at other times I forget;  
who remains calm and silent while I talk,  
and forgives, gently, when I hate,  
who walks where I am not,  
who will remain standing when I die<sup>12</sup>

Jiménez’s poem deals with the duality of the ‘I’ in a similar way to Beckett’s *neither* (1976), a prose-poem that Beckett handed over to the American composer Morton Feldman. Interestingly, upon meeting Beckett, Feldman had showed him “the score of some music that he had written on some lines from Beckett’s script for *Film*.” Beckett’s response was that “there was only one theme in his life” (Knowlson 631). Writing *neither* was his attempt to express such ‘one theme.’ Feldman set the text to music and the piece received its first performance in 1977 at the Rome Opera (Brater 32n. 184-5). Beckett’s interest in giving Feldman his life’s ‘theme’ is another sign of the author’s love of music. Knowlson states that “music had always been for [Beckett] the art form that came closest to pure spirit” (654) whilst his “attitude to musicians who wanted to adapt his work was much freer than it was to stage or film directors wishing to do the same thing” (655). Beckett played the piano and the way in which he intentionally employs sounds and voices (rhythm and intonation) in his work is an indication of how relevant music is in Beckett’s writing and in its performance: “he was as conscious of the importance of precisely timed silence as any modern composer. While directing his own plays, musical terms like ‘piano,’

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<sup>12</sup> Original poem: “Yo no soy yo / Soy este / Que va a mi lado sin yo verlo: / que, a veces, voy a ver, / y que, a veces, olvido. / El que calla, sereno, cuando hablo / el que perdona, dulce, cuando odio, / el que pasea por donde no estoy, el que quedará en pie cuando yo muera” (Jiménez 119).



fortissimo,’ ‘andante,’ allegro,’ ‘da capo,’ ‘cadenza’ tripped lightly off his tongue at rehearsals” (655).

In Beckett’s *neither*, its slippery ‘I’ (set between “impenetrable self” and “impenetrable unself”) reminds us of O/E in *Film* as well as of Mouth struggling for an identity in *Not I*. The reference to “unheard footfalls” brings forward the image of May in *Footfalls* while “to and fro” and “back and forth” are not only reminiscent of May’s infinite pacing but of W’s never-ending rocking in *Rockaby* too. In *neither* light and sound appear to be in the same ‘in-between’ situation as the self/unself or as the ‘self and other’ are. Having been written right after *Footfalls*, *neither* seems to summarise not just his ‘theme’, but the images and sounds, as well as Beckett’s main concerns, in his late plays too:

to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow  
  
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself  
by way of neither  
  
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared  
gently close, once away turned from  
gently part again  
  
beckoned back and forth and turned away  
  
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam  
or the other  
  
unheard footfalls only sound  
  
till at last halt for good, absent for good  
from self and other  
  
then no sound  
  
then gently light unfading on that unheeded  
neither  
  
unspeakable home (*neither* 184)

Depicting the duality of an ‘I’ must have been Beckett’s intention when trying to portray both pursuer (E) and pursued (O) separately in *Film*. And his conclusion proves the point that perception (and being) cannot be avoided. Following in Schopenhauer’s footsteps, Beckett does indeed prove that will represents ‘an unwelcome intrusion.’

In this regard, it is very interesting how Beckett had himself pondered on a metaphorical interpretation of cataracts years earlier:

There are moments where the veil of hope is finally ripped away and the eyes, suddenly liberated, see their world as it is, as it must be. Alas, it does not last long, the perception quickly passes: the eyes can only bear such a merciless light for a short while, the thin skin of hope re-forms and one returns to the world of phenomena. Hope is the cataract of the spirit that cannot be pierced until it is ripe for decay. Not every cataract ripens: many a human being spends his whole life enveloped in the mist of hope. And even if the cataract can be pierced for a moment it almost always re-forms immediately; and thus it is with hope.<sup>13</sup> (Tonning 32)

Tonning has pointed out that in this text Beckett is drawing upon Schopenhauer's interpretation of the phenomenal world as "veil of Maya," in Schopenhauer's words: "At times, in the hard experience of our own sufferings or in the vividly recognized suffering of others, knowledge of the vanity and bitterness of life comes close to us who are still enveloped in the veil of Maya"<sup>14</sup> (Qtd. 32).

Beckett himself had expressed in 1937 that reading Schopenhauer was "like suddenly a window opened on a fug" (Knowlson 268), which brings back the image of lifting a veil from one's vision (as opposed to suffering from cataracts). However, despite his broad knowledge, influences, philosophical and psychological background, Beckett consciously tries to avoid a purely rational explanation in his work. In Brater's words, his writing is meant to work "on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (Brater 44). Yet in *Film* he intentionally divides a living 'being' into two parts: E and O, only to realize they are part of a same self. This is similar to the summary E. S. Dallas provides of Hegelian philosophy when he states that German criticism is charged with "a superfecundity of thought that tends to overlay the facts that engage it":

It is all idea [...] It begins by declaring art to be the manifestation of the absolute idea, and when we ask what is the absolute idea, we are told that it is the abstraction of thought in which the identical is identical with the non-identical, and in which absolute being is resolved into absolute nothing. (Dallas 30)

Or, as Beckett wonders in his novel *Watt*: "Nothing [...] But was not that something?" (127). In *Film* O attempts to achieve absolute nothingness by avoiding perception, but this proves to be unattainable. Perceivedness reveals O's being, much to

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<sup>13</sup> Cited from Beckett's 'Clare Street' notebook, dated 11 August 1936. This translation of Beckett's German is from Erik Tonning's *Beckett's Abstract Drama*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 184-5.

<sup>14</sup> From Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1. New York: Dover, 1969.

his disappointment: he is perceived by the camera (E), by the audience, and by his own self. Beckett is presenting a philosophical concept in images where O stands for Object (what is observed) and the camera seems to stand for Subject (the observer). And when Beckett chooses to name the camera E, as in “Eye”, he is consciously making a pun with “I” (self-perception).

It is also very compelling how Illig cleverly concludes her anecdote of the “absolute camel” by pointing out that Beckett prioritized the “basic situation” rather than delving on the ‘why’ of such situation or on the character’s background. The situation is part of the character, or as philosopher José Ortega y Gasset puts it: “I am I and my circumstance.” And, clearly, in Beckett’s work the “circumstance” is the characters’ situation, their setting, and what surrounds them at present. As Nancy Illig expresses it:

It was then that I understood something essential. Beckett gives a basic situation which is the starting point for the actor and which he must accept in order to play his role. This situation is part of the composition and, above all, part of the character, who cannot be imagined without it. (Ben-Zvi 24)

In this way, by focusing on situations, rather than on explanations, philosophical discussions or on a mainly psychological background, Beckett intentionally creates a visual setting that he will progressively reduce, using darkness and light as props; and with minimal information he will make the audience and readers reflect and react, by appealing to their senses. This is why the visuals are so important in his dramatic work. And from the German idea of an ‘absolute camel,’ which must have made Beckett himself reflect on the concept, he decidedly plunged into an ‘absolute’ visual setting in his film, where his aesthetics would soon experience a transformation, gearing towards the ‘absolute’ minimal and towards his long-searched ‘abstraction.’

Shooting *Film* proved difficult and its first days of filming were not successful. But catastrophes in Beckett always open a door. Alan Schneider, who had directed theatre and television plays, but had no previous film experience, suffered from what he expresses as “beginning-director problems,” and describes the first two shooting days of *Film* as a “disaster”:

light problems, traffic problems, actor problems [...] and camera problems [...] I wished we had not started with what really was a massive outdoor sequence. Too

many things went wrong. [...] The second day provided different problems but was about as horrendous as the first. [...] Worst of all, we saw the first day's rushes [...] The lighting was gloomy throughout. The performances, except for Buster's, were terrible. The group scenes suffered so badly from that strobe effect that they were impossible to watch. [...] And the budget would not permit our going down there again to do everything over. It was another disaster, a real one. (Par. 19)

Beckett and Schneider had already gone together through 'disaster' when Schneider had directed the American premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956, in Miami. Eugenie Rosa Muckle ('Jean' Schneider), Alan Schneider's widow, explains in *Notfilm* that the premiere "was a catastrophe [...]. [A]bout 95% of the people walked out. And so we were tarred and feathered by everybody except Tennessee Williams, who was there, and one critic. And both of them said 'this truly is a masterpiece.'" This seems to have been the fate of *Film* too, for it is regarded as a masterpiece by some, and a failed experiment by others. As Alan Schneider puts it:

The critics, naturally, clobbered us or ignored us. One of them called the film "vacuous and pretentious" [...] and even told us how stupid we were to keep Keaton's back to the camera until the end. As to the "message"—esse est percipi—not one had a clue. Somehow or other, Sam and I survived (he's absolutely marvelous at doing that; I'm not) and eventually *Film* got shown at various European film festivals, getting lots of coverage and winning several prizes as well as widespread critical interest. (Par. 48)

Right after the American premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett wrote a letter to Schneider referring to failure and success in a way that resembles how he depicts his doomed characters in his own work, men and women who do not manage to succeed in their endeavours but do not give up either as they go on with their lives (failing again, failing better):

Success and failure on the public level have never mattered much to me, in fact I feel much more at home with the latter [...]. And I cannot help feeling that the success of *Godot* has been very largely the result of a misunderstanding or of various misunderstandings. (Knowlson 420)

James Knowlson summarizes Beckett's life when he entitles Beckett's authorised biography *Damned to Fame*, the title seems to be most fitting.

This time, the failures accumulated while shooting *Film* were useful for giving a final shape to the project. The solution Beckett proposed was to eliminate the entire

opening sequence and to start with Buster Keaton running along the wall (preceded by a close-up of his eye): “That made great sense, [Beckett] thought. He had never been sure all those people belonged in that opening anyway. They gave it and the film a different texture, opened up another world” (Schneider, par. 29). The inability to complete his long and peopled opening scene must have certainly influenced Beckett’s later drama, where he chooses to focus fully on a single character onstage, and on a single situation.

When the outtakes of the discarded street scene resurfaced, Ross Lipman attempted to reconstruct the opening scene from the surviving fragments and production stills, and it can now be watched in *Notfilm*. The original screenplay is also useful to try to figure out Beckett’s initial idea. However, once the discarded images are brought back to life in Lipman’s careful reconstruction, where a variety of characters walk in the open air, they now seem to suggest a carefree and happy universe that is far removed from Beckett’s imagery. It is interesting to witness how different *Film* would have been had the opening scene been kept. Removing it further enhances a desolate setting and the solitude of its main character, it contributes to make *Film* grim. Only three secondary characters appear in the end: “elderly couple,” played by Susan Reed and James Karen, and “frail old flower-woman,” played by Nell Harrison; as opposed to the populated street scene that had initially been devised, and the “pet monkey” the “elderly couple” were supposed to carry under the woman’s left arm also disappears.

Therefore, failure during filming proved positive for the imagery in *Film*. And disaster in Beckett is like catastrophe in *Zorba the Greek*, where failure can give way to beauty. The film version of *Zorba*, directed by Michael Cacoyannis, was also produced in 1964 and in black and white, just as *Film*. It depicts its two main characters (who initially had conflicting points of view) dancing together in the end amidst complete failure and disaster. Although the novel on which it is based (*The Life and Times of Alexis Zorba*) ends differently, it is interesting to point out that its author, Nikos Kazantzakis, had written his dissertation on German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. And the spirit of *Zorba* indeed appears to follow Nietzsche’s ‘formula for greatness’: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity” (Nietzsche 258). Kazantzakis could have very well been struggling with the same ideas Beckett works on: existence and survival in the face of adversity. It is

revealing that Nikos Kazantzakis' gravesite has no name on it but, instead, has an epitaph in Greek that says: "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free." And this is precisely what O longs for but cannot achieve in *Film*. Again, endurance and despair go hand in hand in the very bleak Beckettian universe, and the choice for some of his titles—rich in irony and wordplay—is telling: *Happy Days*, *Worstward Ho*, *Texts for Nothing*, *Endgame*, *Not I*, *Catastrophe*. It is as though Beckett acknowledges existence is flawed and humans try to make whatever they can out of it in sheer resignation. His humanity and compassion for his characters (and for humankind) probably stems from his WWII experience in France, where he had joined the Resistance and witnessed the conflict as well as its aftermath. But he also draws inspiration from the mentally ill, from the homeless, and from drunk characters he knew well from his life experiences both in France and his native Ireland. He clearly sympathises with the destitute in his work and presents such characters with respect while he makes use of their (and his own) despair in his writing. As Beckett puts it: "There were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedgegrows. Ireland is full of them" (Brater 24). His own grandmother, Fannie Beckett, "was often found wandering around the streets of Dublin" (Knowlson 7) after being shut up in strict quarantine with her ill children only but to see three of them die: "'Do you blame her for being driven to drink after all that?'" Beckett used to ask members of his family" (7).

Buster Keaton was himself struggling with alcoholism when poet Allen Ginsberg went to see the filming of *Film* in New York in July 1964. Ginsberg reflects in his poem "Today" how Keaton had ignored a "hairy bum" who approached him in need of money for a drink. Perhaps Keaton regarded this man in the same way as his character O regards E, as being pursued by his own 'I' while both probably struggle with the very same problems:

Tonight I'll call up Jack tell him Buster Keaton is under the Brooklyn Bridge  
by a vast red-brick wall still dead pan alive in red suspenders, portly abdomen.  
Today I saw movies, publishers, bookstores, checks [...]  
And a hairy bum asked Mr. Keaton for money drink! Oh Buster! No answer!  
Today I was really amazed! Samuel Beckett had rats eyes and gold round glasses  
(Ginsberg 353)

Beckett had expressed an interest in cinema since his youth. He even applied to the Moscow State School of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1936, to learn from Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein. In his application letter Beckett said:

I have no experience of studio work and it is naturally in the scenario and editing end of the subject that I am most interested. It is because I realise that the script is function of its means of realisation that I am anxious to make contact with your mastery of these, and beg you to consider me a serious cinéaste worthy of admission to your school. (Leyda 59)

By this we can gather Beckett's interest in the visually effective Soviet film montage and in screenwriting. However, there was no response to his letter. Should he have been accepted, or had he heard back from Eisenstein, Beckett's career would have very probably taken a different turn. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett shared many interests, and both had a fondness for the films of Charlie Chaplin (Knowlson 98). It is very probable that they talked about Eisenstein and about film as an art form, as it is highly significant that James Joyce met Sergei Eisenstein in Paris a year after having met Samuel Beckett in 1928. According to Weiss, Eisenstein visited Joyce to discuss the possibility of filming *Ulysses* and defended the filmic quality of Joyce's novel (Weiss 185). Joyce's interest in cinema is also exemplified by the fact that in late 1909, with the help of four Italian investors, he opened the Volta, "Dublin's first permanent cinema" (183). Unfortunately, the cinema closed two years later. But this new disaster in an Irish film venture must have resounded in Beckett's mind too, for failure appears to be a source of inspiration for him very much in the spirit of Leonard Cohen's lyrics in his song, "Anthem": "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." This not only resembles the image of a film projector (projecting light and images in the darkness), but it has echoes of Eastern philosophy too: after all, Cohen was ordained a Zen Buddhist monk, and his ideas permeate his lyrics. Buddhism, again, relates to Schopenhauer's thought, often considered pessimistic: to avoid desire in order to avoid suffering. In Beckett's writing, desire and hope (and, perhaps, perception too, in *Film*'s case) is also a source of torment. As quoted from Beckett earlier: "the eyes can only bear such a merciless light for a short while, the thin skin of hope re-forms and one returns to the world of phenomena. Hope is the cataract of the spirit" (Tonning 32). Light in Beckett, therefore, mercilessly persists in permitting

existence, in allowing perceivedness. However, darkness is just as important as light in Beckett's drama, as Rodríguez Gago points out, for it plays a potentially rich dramatic role and often seems to be peopled with life: off-stage voices, sounds, sources of light seem to dwell in it (Rodríguez Gago 38).

Beckett would appear to have failed twice in his encounters with cinema, two 'cracks' can be found as light (mercilessly) came in: he received no response from Eisenstein to his application letter and the production of *Film* was partly flawed. However, both experiences not only proved his interest in the audiovisual medium but also forced him to translate what he had in mind in *Film* to his future TV plays and dramatic work. Shooting his film experiment in 35mm seems to have opened his mind. The limits he encountered in *Film* were clearly enriching. His having learned more about the film trade is most probably why Beckett conceived the "piece for television," *Eh Joe*, shortly after *Film*:

Now, with his experience of editing *Film* on a Moviola with Sidney Meyers<sup>15</sup> and Alan Schneider fresh in his mind, he began to conceive of a TV play in which the camera could gradually be moved or 'dollied' in more and more tightly to focus on a single male figure in a room, with a voice inside the head as its sole accompaniment. (Knowlson 533-4)

Beckett directed himself the German version of *Eh Joe* for German TV and chose to count on, again, with actors Deryk Mendel and Nancy Illig. Illig provided the voice Joe hears inside his head, the voice of a woman who committed suicide for the love of Joe. This time the character's 'E', or the one who pursues Joe (whose name sounds suspiciously similar to O), is a sound rather than an eye. Being worried about the voice being mistaken for a living woman, they came up with the idea of whispering the part. In Illig's words:

our experiments were often watched skeptically and without comprehension on the monitors. But Beckett did not let himself get annoyed by this. One morning he came in and said, "Now we'll make it all dead," and this is how by progressive reduction we ended up with the hammering staccato of a ghost's voice. (Ben-Zvi 26)

In Beckett's ensuing 'experiments,' it is this 'progressive reduction' that he keeps exploring after the *Film* experience, and this can be sensed in his future work. And although

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<sup>15</sup> Film editor, director and screenwriter. Sidney Meyers edited *Film* and became Beckett's friend.



in *Eh Joe* he concentrates again on a male character, Beckett will soon focus on three female protagonists that share similar traits: Mouth, May and W. And it seems like all three ghost-like characters embody the female ‘ghost’s voice’ from *Eh Joe*. However, the characters are now perceived by the audience: they are seen and heard, but their appearance is uncommon and makes us wonder where they are, ‘when’ they are living, or whether they are alive at all.

*Film* triggered Beckett’s interest in pushing the boundaries of drama to the limit and it is interesting to note that the original title of *Film* was going to be *The Eye* (Brater 76), which again highlights the ideas of perceivedness and identity/self, I/Eye phonetically being the same. And this, in turn, brings *Film* closer to the play *Not I* (or Not ‘Eye’), where a Mouth (rather than an Eye) is the protagonist. It is as though the lens (or Eye) that follows O in *Film* would later zoom-in on Mouth in *Not I* (1972), focusing on her lips and words rather than on what the Eye perceives. Actually, Beckett allowed the filming of *Not I* and, in the filmed version (1973), the camera now fully zooms-in to only show a close-up of Mouth, reducing the enveloping darkness and discarding the silent character of Auditor. This imaginary lens will later open up on May walking in *Footfalls* (1975) and, later on, focuses on W sitting on her rocking chair in *Rockaby* (1980), in the same fashion as O rocks himself in *Film* or as Murphy previously did in *Murphy*, Beckett’s first novel, which opens with its protagonist tied up to a rocking chair, rocking himself to and fro in the darkness, longing for sensory deprivation.

In this way, these three female characters in Beckett’s late drama show different angles to a similar story we have already witnessed in *Film*: the characters are doomed to exist. The difference is that O attempts to hide away from sensory perception and fails to do so in a silent and well-lit film set; while Mouth, May and W already know they will fail in any attempt to escape their repetitive pattern of existence on a very dark stage. Plus, this time, we (the audience) fully confront the ‘Object’—avoiding O’s 45° angle of immunity—and are able to listen to the sounds that accompany the solitude of these three dimly lit main characters.

### III. Three late plays: After *Film*

The production of *Film* made Beckett realise the limitations of space: a large and heavy 35mm camera, its movements, and the bulky equipment involved (dolly, tracks, lights, tripods) are constrained by it. This must have made him reflect further on how to use space wisely. He was also forced to watch out for time (measured in feet and film reels), for photochemical film is expensive and its availability is limited and dependent on a film's budget. And he experienced how crucial light is when filming and how camera framing reveals only what is chosen to be 'perceived' by the audience. He also witnessed film professionals at work (both on the technical side and the artistic side) and he must have certainly admired the work of Buster Keaton, who brilliantly navigated the hot New York summer wearing a long overcoat and hat, as the screenplay dictated:

[Keaton] was totally professional: patient, imperturbable, relaxed, easy to tell something to, helpful, there. He must have been over seventy, but he never complained for a single moment when we asked him, for some reason or other, to run along that obstacle course of a wall over and over again in the broiling heat. Nor did he object when we kept adding obstacles that would have bothered a steeplechase expert. Or nag when something went wrong with something, which happened at least sixty percent of the time, or when we didn't do something the way he did it in 1927. [...] he was willing to sit for interminable periods of time, with dozens of lamps blazing at him, for us to get several good shots of his eye. (Schneider, par. 23)

Keaton's professionalism might have further encouraged Beckett to ask for the impossible in the future performances of his work, for he witnessed how a highly experienced actor (who had also been a film director) wonderfully responded to his demanding mise-en-scène and concept. In addition, by running into different problems during filming, Beckett took big steps towards simplifying things. What he gathered from his first experience with moving images is an aesthetic contribution to his late drama which can, therefore, be said to be indebted to both the positive and negative experiences he encountered in *Film*.

The plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* are proof of how specific and detailed it is what Beckett chooses to be seen on a stage, very much like he carefully picked what was framed (or revealed) by the camera (E and O's point of view). By pondering on perception

in *Film*, Beckett appears to have become highly selective as to what to show with light in the future.

The three protagonists (Mouth, May and W) in these late plays share a similar void-like spatial setting, a seemingly endless time and their female gender. In *Not I* Mouth talks; in *Footfalls* May walks; in *Rockaby* W rocks herself (on a rocking chair). There is no other action. They all seem to foreshadow a sort of doom, as we might already gather by the plays' titles: the "not" in *Not I* implies the negation of an "I" (or an 'eye'); the "falls" in *Footfalls* points at a repeated downfall; and the "a-by" in *Rockaby* brings forward the idea of a farewell ('a-bye') or emphasises the lack of company: there is nobody *by* the character's side, she is not being rocked *by* anyone, and she is not rocking anyone but her own self.

The three characters are agonizing in this void, as they are presented to us onstage. They are also talking or listening to other voices. It is their agony, or what seems to be a last moment in their existence, that is summarized in the visuals of each play. It is no coincidence that in Beckett's notes to *Film* he describes being seen (acknowledging one's existence) as "anguish of perceivedness" (CDW, 323). What is shown on stage and what the eye and senses perceive is all that matters, for a theatrical performance cannot happen if it is not seen by an audience. Samuel Beckett is looking for an aesthetic reaction to the images he meticulously creates with light/darkness/space aided by the sound and rhythm of his protagonists' words, intonation and movements. He appears to have conceived these plays as a visual artist or, even, as an avant-garde filmmaker, carefully choosing what the audience's eyes and ears perceive.

From a young age Beckett was drawn to paintings, regularly visiting the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. He later pursued his interest in art during his visits to galleries and museums in London, Italy, France and Germany. The influence art had in him seems to have contributed to the creation of his imagery and personal world, where everything is painstakingly staged. Brater comments that *Not I* "looks very much like a surrealist painting come to life. One thinks in particular of René Magritte" and Beckett himself mentioned that the central image of the play was "in part suggested by Caravaggio's *Decollation of St. John* in Valetta Cathedral" (Brater 24). *Footfalls* suggests "the endless pacing of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking" (72) or "one of Dante's damned" (52) and

Knowlson compares the position of May's hands to those of *The Virgin of the Annunciation* by Antonello da Messina, which Beckett had admired in Munich (Knowlson 625). Billie Whitelaw in *Footfalls* "felt like a moving, musical, Edvard Munch painting" (Whitelaw 89). And *Rockaby*, which was translated as *Berceuse* in French, brings Vincent van Gogh's and Paul Gauguin's paintings *La Berceuse* to mind (Brater 175). Apparently, while modelling for Van Gogh and Gauguin, Madame Augustine Roulin was rocking her baby's cradle while sitting on her chair, hence the title of *La Berceuse*, which in French stands for a lullaby to rock a baby to sleep. According to Jonathan Jones, "Van Gogh hoped *La Berceuse* would be seen and felt by the poor and the 'broken-hearted' [...] He said it was a picture that might console fishermen far out at sea in a storm. Instead of being thrown about by the ocean, they would feel they were being rocked in a cradle and remember their own childhood lullabies" (Jones, par. 8). This is similar to what actress Lisa Dwan<sup>16</sup> expresses when relating how complex and demanding staging and performing Beckett's late drama is, very much like facing a sea storm: "You could almost describe the experience as like being a sailor, catching the wind and then keeping the sail taut. You have to have all your equipment pointed in the right direction. Then you can begin" (Crompton, par. 4). *Rockaby* might also recall the iconic yet darker image of *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* by Whistler, generally known as *Whistler's Mother*. This, in turn, can bring to mind Alfred Hitchcock's far more sinister portrayal of a mother in his 1960 film, *Psycho*.

As he devises his main characters (or stage figures), Beckett is drawing from his past experiences too. He was very moved by the suffering and destruction he encountered when he joined the Irish Red Cross, right after WWII. This made him witness the devastation of war and it seems to have further shifted his attention towards those who suffered most the horrors and the after-effects of the armed conflict. In such a dark world, he manages to find inspiration to portray human beings with kindness and tenderness, yet merciless at the apparent meaninglessness of what appears to be a painful existence.

And it is the beauty he gathers from the arts and the horrible devastation he draws both from war and misery what he manages to aptly combine when creating and designing his world that appears to be made of shades of grey, reminiscent of his black and white

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Dwan, following Billie Whitelaw's footsteps, performed the roles of Mouth, May and W in 2014-15, directed by Walter Asmus.

*Film*, which was symbolically set in “about 1929” (CDW, 324). The choice of period is interesting as it is set between the World Wars, and it is also the year of the stock market crash (which accelerated the Great Depression), all of which stands for further despair. At the same time, in cinema history this period marks the transition from silent to sound film, and the introduction of sound was initially criticised by film historians and theoreticians such as Rudolf Arnheim, whose work Beckett was familiar with (Knowlson 226). It is interesting to notice how Arnheim’s ideas might have influenced Beckett’s visual settings, for Arnheim not only favours silent films, as opposed to the “feeling of uneasiness that every talking film arouses in the author” (Arnheim 199), he also defends the quality of the lack of colour, which is what we see Beckett intentionally favour in his late drama. In Arnheim’s chapter “Artistic use of Lighting and of the Absence of Colour,” from his book *Film as Art*, he expresses this idea:

When the film artist has to depend on black and white he is offered particularly vivid and impressive effects (65). [...] The composition of the film image is intelligible and striking chiefly because only black, white, and gray masses, black lines on a white ground, or white lines on a black ground, provide the raw material (68). [...] If the art of giving the illusion of the reality of stuffs rouses great admiration even in painting, the effect is more uncannily exciting when it is obtained without the aid of color—simply in black and white. (71)

In this bleak environment, we expect a dead end with no way out, yet Beckett surprisingly manages to leave a glimmer of hope in his writing and in his staging, where directed light might stand for life, very much in the spirit of Beckett’s opening lines to his novel *Murphy* (1938): “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new” (4). This resignation and optimistic (yet sarcastic) humour is what saves his work from simply depicting sheer horror. And this is also how Beckett employs light in his late drama.

Beckett’s interest in the arts and in film, and his interest in the dispossessed or the mentally ill, are crucial to understand what these three plays convey. His characters manage to carry a deep message in what initially seems to be an absurd decrepit image that is accompanied by words. And although his writing and staging in these three plays appears to be closer to the visual arts than to literature, as Prinz puts it: “Beckett produces a single image or picture that captivates the audience and moves them” (153). That is, the effect he creates and what he gets across with minimal text and props is just as effective as a lengthy

character-driven novel. Beckett seems to have chosen drama (and film) to materialize an image or portrait he wants to transmit to his readers/audience, to be able to freeze what he has in mind but using the concept of time, which passes in front of us as we confront his characters' existence. He controls every aspect of the image he transmits, as we may gather from his detailed stage directions. And it is as though he wants to give life to a photograph or to a painting and, by watching it, the audience is forced to witness its slow death. Susan Sontag expresses this idea, applied to photography, when she says that "photography is the inventory of mortality [...]. Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction" (70).

These three plays might indeed resemble black and white silent films in which the main characters' rhythmic voice and movements would stand for their own soundtrack or musical accompaniment. And the striking lack of colour reminds us that it is the use of light and darkness what creates the seemingly greyish setting in which the main characters are confined, while they are presented in the same way a camera would frame the action and its protagonists in a film:

-Mouth is framed in what might stand for an "Extreme Close-Up" of a camera, while her lips move up and down (in a vertical movement:  $\uparrow\downarrow$ ).

-May is framed in what would stand for a "General Shot" of a camera, while she paces from one side of the stage to the other (in a horizontal sideways movement:  $\leftarrow\rightarrow$  and turns around at each end, further enhancing an infinite loop of never-ending time:  $\infty$ ).

-W is framed in what might stand for a "Medium Shot" of a camera, while she rocks back and forth on her chair (exploring depth).

However, although the characters move on stage ceaselessly, they do not seem to advance (or to progress) at all. They remain enclosed in their frame in the same way O appears to be trapped in Beckett's *Film* as he tries to hide away from the camera lens. In *Film* there is no 'soundtrack' but O checks his pulse at different times, which surprisingly makes us sense the rhythm of his heartbeats. According to Ulrika Maude, Beckett did "originally plan to include realistic sounds"<sup>17</sup> and he "also wished to include the sound of

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<sup>17</sup> Maude is citing from S. E. Gontarski, 'Film and Formal Integrity,' in Beja et al (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*. Cleveland: Ohio State University Press, 1983, pp. 129-36.

O's panting"<sup>18</sup> (41). Therefore, the pulse-checking might be an intentional way to remind us that O is alive, yet we (as the audience) are unable to 'hear' the proof of his existence.

Although *Film* has no dialogues and these three short plays make use of words, all four convey a very similar idea, imagery and repetitive actions. The plays appear to be continuing this very idea of hiding from an eye (and an *I*) to elude being perceived or to evade existence. However, films and plays are made to be seen (and heard) and this can again stand for the prison the characters cannot escape from, where light and space seem to give the characters an unwanted life.

Framing or enclosing these three female characters with directed light and darkness contributes to the very idea of fragmentation and solitude that their words suggest. The dim lighting reveals a bit of life, yet the darkness stands for a looming death. In such a space, these three grey characters, who struggle between light and darkness, turn to their own pasts or to their own creative artistry as they make up an *other* or try to compose their own selves (their *I*) from their fragmented pieces of life in order to keep themselves company or amused:

-Mouth (to whom, obviously, to talk is to exist) is a fragmented piece of a body. She is a dismembered object searching for her whole self. Mouth tries to bring her life together while she compulsively talks, searching for someone, for an I/Eye that might perceive her and remind her that she is still alive. This is her own way of 'checking her pulse.'

-May's story is set apart from that of Amy's (May's creation and, also, its anagram). And Amy is separate from Voice (supposedly, the voice of May's mother). However, all of May's stories could be part of a same tale created by her. Therefore, Voice (the 'character') could very well be May's voice too (just as O=E in *Film*). And May would then be making up and/or recollecting her dying mother and, by creating, becoming a "mother" herself.

-W listens to her own recorded voice (in a similar fashion to Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*). She is longing not only to rejoin her mother in death (or to return to the womb:

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<sup>18</sup> Maude is citing from the *Film* notebook: 'Notes for Film' and 'Percipi Notes,' held at the Beckett International Foundation Archive, University of Reading.

achieving non-birth) but, also, to become like her (“another like herself” being the most repeated line) or to *double* a *You*: ‘W.’

Mouth, May and W portray the same *angst* Beckett’s characters appear to have previously experienced but, this time, their visual appearance on stage is far more striking and insightful. They deliver their words through an interminable movement of lips (Mouth), pacing of feet (May) and rocking (W) that clearly contrast their static lives. They remain trapped in their existence: Mouth is talking herself to death, May is walking herself to death, and W is “rocking herself to death,” using Billie Whitelaw’s words (Qtd. in Brater, 175).

The characters seem to have aged prematurely, May is said to be in her “forties” (CDW, 400) while W is expecting death wearing her mother’s clothes and sitting on her mother’s chair. By re-creating her mother, W is giving birth to a dead character. This is the same contradiction that can be found in the line “fuck life” (442), a line that implies both sex (to procreate) and existence (‘life’) combined in a common expression or vulgarism that conveys the opposite: a rejection of life.

The death of Beckett’s own mother in 1950 appears to have deeply affected him. And the references to a mother in his late drama might account for this too. It is significant that it is during this late period when Beckett finds a need to use a female protagonist that would stand for a kind of Clov (*Endgame*), Krapp (*Krapp’s Last Tape*) or O (*Film*), his earlier male characters. By choosing female characters, Beckett now plays even more with the ideas of sterility, rejection of birth, the link with the mother, or the womb (a dark space that might bear life). It is not possible to find such a thing in Beckett’s prose, where a male world is sensed all along and women remain secondary, mostly in plain love-lacking roles, as wives, or dealing with prostitution. In addition, each of these three plays portrays its main female character as though their situation were not extraordinary and were completely used to it. And habits and routines are very important to go on living, as Beckett shows in a slightly similar way in *Happy Days* (1961), which opens with the line: “Another heavenly day” (CDW 138). However, in this earlier play, Winnie, its main character, seems to be far more optimistic—despite being equally doomed, for she is sinking into a mound—plus she is ‘accompanied’ onstage—though probably not perceived—by a man (her husband) to whom



she talks to. It is Beckett's only play in colour, perhaps to show Winnie's "pernicious" optimism, whereas Mouth, May and W live in a seemingly black and white world.

These characters' existence is a lonely one in all three scenarios but, while they are looking for company, they are also yearning for non-existence, two things that strike us as conflicting. This becomes especially relevant when we revisit George Berkeley's argument: "esse est percipi" (to be is to be perceived) employed in *Film*. That is, if an *other* exists (and perceives), their existence would then be revealed and this is something these characters do not want to acknowledge but, rather, avoid and, ultimately, end. Therefore, their appearance is not only interesting but quite meaningful too. As Rodríguez Gago points out:

If words are inadequate to express pain, maybe that is why Beckett focused on the image, and, in his drama, the images of the female body are amongst the author's most original and surprising.<sup>19</sup> (66)

Beckett is indeed breaking away from the traditional canon of women's appearance in literature. O (an Object) is the male protagonist in *Film*, whilst the three female protagonists have escaped stereotypical objectification, a role to which literary tradition has generally relegated females. In addition, what Beckett is showing in his three plays is not grotesque either, for he depicts his characters in a sensible and caring way which further contributes to Beckett's artistry and originality. We might even see ourselves reflected in the futile existence of his characters. This connection with the audience is what, in the end, makes these unusual and desolate images universal and moving.

However, as Mouth is out of context or, rather, lacks context as a body/persona, it is interesting to consider her possible objectification while she struggles for an identity. In the filmed version of *Not I* (1973), where Billie Whitelaw plays Mouth, this becomes more obvious as the use of close-ups distorts Mouth's existence even more, just as O's eye is further objectified in its extreme close-up in *Film*. To compare Mouth to a sexual 'object' in this filmed close-up has brought up the cliché exploitation (or 'perception') of women in media, an "objectification of woman as Other / as mouth / as vagina / as pornographic image," as Ben-Zvi has suggested:

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<sup>19</sup> Translated from the original: "Si para expresar el dolor las palabras son inadecuadas, quizá por esta razón Beckett se centró en la imagen, y, en su teatro, las imágenes del cuerpo femenino están entre las más originales y sorprendentes de este autor".

The droning of the barely visible image of the stage version [...] becomes on the small screen the gigantic aperture [...] just another genital display, reduced by the gaze of the camera into the very object whose tale she tells. (248)

Beckett appears to have had the British actress Billie Whitelaw in mind while writing these three plays that have, in turn, been regarded as the “Whitelaw trilogy” (Simone 56). And the actress had already played Winnie in *Happy Days*, which can account for a further connection between the three late plays. Whitelaw worked regularly in cinema and appeared in popular suspense and horror films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Frenzy* or Richard Donner’s *The Omen*. She was nominated for a BAFTA for *Twisted Nerve*, the music of which was composed by Bernard Herrmann, who was also responsible for the soundtracks of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and *Psycho*. Her experience in genre movies confers on Beckett’s plays a connection with the horrific, rather than with comedy. And it, again, brings to mind Eisenstein’s and *Film*’s ‘silent cries.’



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

Fig.1 - Billie Whitelaw (as May) in *Footfalls*.

Fig.2 - Billie Whitelaw’s audible scream (as Mouth) in *Not I*.

Fig.3 - Buster Keaton’s silent cry (as O) in *Film*.

Fig.4 - Silent cry in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

In the Beckettian universe being out in the world, living, seems to be a cold, gloomy, loveless and sterile experience that ends up in death. To die (to achieve non-existence) is something that the characters appear to long for, as it stands for an end to their agonies. To exist, on the other hand, seems to be a traumatizing experience one can only endure by passing time, usually ‘distracting’ oneself. It is at this point that the characters make up an ‘other’ parting from their own lives and experiences. It is then, too, when they search for this ‘other’—whatever it may be—that will keep them in company. However, the ‘other’ in most cases ends up being their own *I* (again, as in  $E=O$ ). The characters, in this way, desperately try to amuse their own existence, inventing another like themselves or “a little like”—as W says—(*CDW* 435) to pass the time.

Beckett avoids the need to philosophise about life, something that existentialist writers or characters always do (only but to reach similar conclusions). His characters will fail in any attempt—or, rather, desire—to end their existence; in the meanwhile, each waits eternally, attempting to create their own “Godot” to justify their waiting. A possible critique of religion can be sensed too (God/Godot): an idea of trusting blindly an unknown character who does not appear to answer your questions is thrust forward, a possible ‘opium for the people’ in order to go on with life or to retain hope.

At the same time, Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea that “hell is other people,” from his 1944 play *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*), seems to be opposed: it is to look for/to create (to create, perchance to find?) an ‘other’ what will, apparently, make the agony smoother. But Sartre’s words are also confirmed: to find an ‘other’ is to acknowledge your own existence, which would then be perceived by this ‘other’ (following Berkeley’s aforementioned premise), life then being hell with or without any others, and this is something that would certainly suit the merciless Beckettian sense of existence.

If we consider the three plays as a trilogy, following the chronological order in which they were written, the action develops as follows, in a sort of cycle:

- I. *Not I*: Two lips move ceaselessly at a fast pace: youth.
- II. *Footfalls*: Two feet slowly walk in never-ending loops: middle age.
- III. *Rockaby*: A body slowly moves on a rocking chair: old age and, paradoxically, infancy.

The cycle of life, rather than joyful, seems to be painful in Beckett's universe, but it is often shown with humour. And the experience of witnessing death in the making is what Beckett seems to be exploring in *Film* too. As mentioned, the main character's name (O) points at the objectification of what is being filmed or perceived (the target), while E (the perceiver) stands for the Camera's eye or the Audience's: an 'I' that gets us all involved in the experience of seeing. The film *Come and See* (Dir. Elem Klimov, 1985) might come to mind, a film in which witnessing the horrors of war plays an important role, while the film's title is revealingly borrowed from the Apocalypse of John (Book of Revelation):

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see [...] And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Rev. 6.1-6.8)

Being alone and being alive (to exist) run parallel in Beckett's world. The author appears to have been impressed by the different people he encountered throughout his life. His aforementioned interest in the mentally ill and dispossessed seems relevant given that both cases might imply solitude and, oftentimes, rejection in mainstream society. When looking at these three female protagonists, one cannot help but to remember The Beatles' song, "Eleanor Rigby," a woman herself, who picks up the rice on her own in the empty church where a wedding has taken place. The characters The Beatles describe in the song's lyrics are similar to Beckett's characters, and are summarised in the song's line: "Ah, look [perceive!] at all the lonely people" (Lennon-McCartney).

In *Film* O starts out by walking rapidly in the street, but ends up slowly rocking himself in a room. The movement of the rocking chair might stand for O's (unheard) pulse or heartbeats. The repetitive nature of *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* also has a metronome-like rhythm. It is surprising to find both pieces intensely poetic while W and May are dying away, being merely ghosts. Mouth, however, does not follow this slow rhythm as she speeds up her speech, in a different kind of lyricism. The dim light (along with sound) seems to rule all three plays, carefully disclosing the characters' existence while the

darkness surrounding them all is equally carefully controlled, swallowing up the three characters just as Winnie sank into the earth in *Happy Days*.

May and W's existence is that of grey figures that gradually seem to disappear or slowly turn to dust (like us all, the cycle 'ashes to ashes and dust to dust' being recalled). Mouth, however, is different: she is physically fragmented and fails to reunite her-self; she refuses to acknowledge her "I" (a similar problem to that of May and W) and talks about "she;" though Mouth surprisingly 'stares' at the audience, becoming an Eye. Being a character on a stage also makes us more aware of the possibilities of the body. It is a fragmented body or one in decay what is being represented, and in both cases the same idea of disintegration is transmitted. The staging also highlights the division between mind and body, a dualism that is similar to O's obsession to run away from E.

In their endeavour to keep going on with their lives, Mouth, May and W create partly fictionalized characters, they play a role and they tell a story (or several) for company. In a way, O is also creating E by acknowledging E's existence and by trying to escape from E. As creation becomes a synonym of giving life to something, we can now fully understand the impossibility of the characters to set themselves free from existence.

#### IV. “Not quite there”: Towards an influential iconic imagery

No future is sensed in these late plays and, instead, never-ending repetitions take place in the present time. The idea of an ‘Inferno’ being found in life and not in death, turning Dante’s universe upside down, would fit these plays. The characters are not descending into Hell, they are already there, very slowly disappearing into the nothingness O also yearned for. The characters talk, walk and rock just as O tried to rock himself towards non-perception and non-existence in *Film*’s ending, as his rocking “dies down.” The three female characters remain alone onstage (Auditor’s mysterious figure in *Not I* being left aside), and their existence is clearly bound to their past and/or to their Mothers (M/Others bound to their own selves). Beckett’s *Film* and his late plays are indebted to his past work—they are part of the ‘distillation’ Knowlson refers to in *Notfilm*—and Beckett seems to be looking for an ‘essence’ in his late work, where his characters are “dragging up the past...flashes from all over,” as Mouth says in *Not I* (CDW 380). His writing appears to be tied to his own memory and to that of his own mother whose name was revealingly May, as the main character in *Footfalls*.

Beckett had expressed in 1950 that the life of his dying mother “continue[d] its sad decline [...] like the decrescendo of a train I used to listen to in the night at Ussy, interminable, starting up again just when one thinks it is over and silence restored forever” (Knowlson 382). The ‘interminable’ image and sounds he suggests, and their repetitive nature, are already pointing at the staging of his late plays, where the visuals and sounds are prioritized, and words (content) remain secondary. The ‘decrescendo of a train’ is like the rocking chair in *Film* or *Rockaby*, both in sound and movement, and it resembles the rhythmic pacing in *Footfalls* too. Beckett thus appears to be trying to create images that will stand out in the audience’s mind, to touch the viewer’s feelings, just as he remembered images in his own mind that affected him deeply (as both the Ussy night train and the hospital patient’s silent cry might prove).

Referring to *Footfalls*, Beckett said: “The walking up and down is the central image [...] The text, the words, were only built up around this picture” (Oppenheim 59) and Billie Whitelaw, who played May, expresses such an iconic effect in the following way: “I felt I was being painted with light” (125). The ‘picture’ and pacing sounds Beckett chooses to

open *Footfalls* with, indeed, resemble the night train that echoes in Beckett's memory intertwined with that of his dying mother, whom he had nursed in the same way as May nurses her mother in *Footfalls*:

M: Mother. [*Pause. No louder.*] Mother.

[*Pause.*]

V: Yes, May.

M: Were you asleep?

V: Deep asleep. [*Pause.*] I heard you in my deep sleep. [*Pause.*] There is no sleep so deep I would not hear you there.

[*Pause. M resumes pacing...*] (CDW 399)

It appears to be night-time and death is not a deep enough sleep for V nor for May, who hears her mother's voice (or re-creates it), forever resounding in her memory. As Rodríguez Gago puts it: "May fails to bring back her mother's bodily image but manages to rescue her voice [...]. The sounds of May's footsteps echoing in her mind seem to be the agents of her recollections and produce this opening dialogue with her mother" (122). By evoking a missing person's image or voice that resounds in the mind (or in the dark stage), the missing person's memory is being kept alive (not allowing it to die). In this context it seems like memories have a haunting presence. This might be what Beckett's sensibility is seeking to convey in his late work, as he ages, and as he remembers. It is also what the severed and disembodied Mouth might be doing in *Not I*, in her own act of remembering the pieces of her broken self, members of a missing body. This is why it is so revealing to read Beckett chronologically, for his characters appear to be aging with him.

It is interesting that the three secondary characters in *Film* are described as "elderly couple" (CDW 325) and "frail old woman" (326), suggesting that it is the ghostly line between life and death that Beckett is seeking in his late staging, which is why O also repeatedly checks his pulse. The prose-poem, *neither*, clearly suggests an 'in-between' state too (and a duality of selves). Whitelaw, herself, develops this idea: "I've never asked [Beckett] what anything meant, apart from one question in *Footfalls*: 'Am I dead?' And I think you know the answer, don't you? 'Let's just say you're not quite there.' And I understood exactly what he meant. I then knew I was in a sort of strange no-man's land, gray, neither here nor there" (Kalb 235). After *Film* Beckett's characters indeed seem to be 'not quite there' in 'a sort of strange no-man's land.' And the effect such staging and

performances have is quite striking, as actress Jessica Tandy (who played Mouth in *Not I*) concludes: “You may find nothing in it, but I suspect you will never forget it” (Brater 19).

A psychological explanation might be found to try to justify these late characters’ behaviour (schizophrenia, aphasia, depression, agoraphobia, neurosis, etc.) but Beckett’s characters are stage figures: images, not people; and, therefore, cannot be ‘psychoanalysed.’ The feeling and impact these late plays leave behind in the audience’s senses is what Beckett is really after. He draws from his past and memory images that had an effect on him and tries to ‘distil’ them onstage. Perhaps this is what he was so eager to learn from the Soviet filmmakers Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and what he gleaned from the editing process he personally experienced in *Film*: to choose the best images, the ones that will tell a compelling story (or express a concern), and to show them accordingly to an audience. That is, to narrate with images. It is also what he was forced to confront when he chose to omit *Film*’s opening scene. Beckett does not want to explain what is going on in his work, he just wants us to ‘perceive’ something that is somehow moving yet unexplainable and, after all, dark and comic too, for the tear and the laughter are always close in Beckett’s work.

When Beckett was stabbed in Paris in 1938, he asked the man who assaulted him why he had done it, and the man—whose name was, ironically, Prudent—politely replied: “I don’t know why, sir. I’m sorry” (Knowlson 283). This kind of extreme yet unfathomable human behaviour resonates in the author’s work.

Beckett was interested in psychotherapy and had undergone treatment himself. He had also read about psychology and psychoanalysis and, due to this, his love/hate relationship with his mother must have been fully analysed by him: “I am what her savage loving has made me” (113n. 709), Beckett said. It is, therefore, most interesting to point out that, when O tries to escape perceivedness in *Film*, he locks himself up in what might indeed be something like his mother’s room, as might be interpreted from Beckett’s dialogue with Alan Schneider:

Schneider: You see, the thing that threw us, Sam [...] is the business about, was it his mother’s room? Everybody who’s ever read the script, everybody without exception, thinks it’s his room.



Beckett: 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. (*Notfilm*)

The connection to a mother's room can stand for a return to the womb, given that Beckett had stated: "I have a clear memory of my own fetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to" (Bryden 161). And these words are also describing his late characters' situation onstage: agonising, alone, in a void. The idea of such an imprisonment in 'the agony and darkness,' where 'no voice' or 'movement' might provide a way out, indeed describes Mouth, May, W and O (who ends up covering up both eyes).

The interpretation of the room as a dramatic space is richer, for in the summer of 1945 (Knowlson 55n. 772) Beckett had experienced a revelation right in his "mother's room" (352). His artistic epiphany is regarded as a "pivotal moment" in Beckett's career (351) which signals the desire to embrace ignorance, darkness and reductionism in his work. In Beckett's words:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more [...] I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (352)

Knowlson rounds up Beckett's future intentions by adding: "his work would focus on poverty, failure, exile and loss; as he put it, on man as 'non-knower' and as 'non-cancer'" (352-3). Such a 'pivotal moment' can, therefore, be sensed in the background of *Film* as O enters what appears to be his mother's room (empty yet surprisingly inhabited by a cat, a dog, a parrot in a cage, and a fish in a fish bowl). O voluntarily locks himself up in this room—his 'situation', his 'circumstance'—, just as Krapp was stuck in a similar room in *Krapp's Last Tape* (a play in which the main character talks about his own revelation or "vision"), and just as Joe will soon be in *Eh Joe*. *Film* also depicts 'poverty, failure, [voluntary] exile and loss' and it indeed forced its author to 'subtract,' by cutting out a scene, action, characters. A man alone in a room is a repeated situation in Beckett's earlier work but this room is about to be replaced by stage darkness in his late plays.

As Oppenheim expresses it: "reductionism enhances the visually evocative power of the text" (125) and as Beckett 'subtracts,' he focuses thematically on despair. It is after

*Film* when he concentrates more obviously on the visuals to convey such ideas, and he thus consciously works his way towards the ‘almost abstract’ as he incorporates a very careful and minimal use of sound too.

*Play* is said to have also been ‘pivotal’ in Beckett’s work and many critics talk about the “post-play-plays”, however, *Film* influenced visually his future work, in the same way as his mother’s ghostly presence seems to have pervaded his later writing. It is as though, as Beckett ages, he himself reflects further on death and on the ghost-like images memory conjures, like the family photographs that O keeps with him to later tear them all up. The ‘essence’ in Beckett’s work appears to be birth and death. Women “give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more,” as Pozzo expresses it in *Waiting for Godot* (CDW 83) or as Vladimir’s responds: “Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener” (84).

When Beckett chooses to work with ageing female characters it is very possible that he is putting himself in his now absent mother’s shoes (or in the shoes of so many elderly women ‘in the ditches’), trying to understand her world. Perhaps he was trying to understand old age and his mother was an inspiration. As she was dying, Beckett had explained that “most of the time her mind wanders and she lives in a world of nightmares and hallucinations” (Knowlson 382). The ghost-like figure of his mother suffering in a world removed from reality is what he might have tried to evoke onstage. As Rodríguez Gago has expressed it: “In *Not I*, *Footfalls*, and *Rockaby* [...] the three female protagonists [...] are ghostly bodies impregnated by the sound of ghostly voices, voices which seem to persist in memory even when the material bodies which had supported them have already disappeared from memory” (2003, 124).

The ‘otherness’—or company—the three characters search for in these plays becomes their own selves. If there is, indeed, an ‘other’ then Mouth, May and W—just like O—would certainly be perceived, and if they create an ‘other’ they would be giving ‘birth’ (life) to something as creators/inventors. It is death what the characters are longing for but, in their waiting, they seem to be opposing this death wish: they appear to be ‘damned’ to eternity and to go on living, just as the interminable ‘decrecendo’ of the train Beckett describes. As Rodríguez Gago suggests, in *Rockaby* the voice (V) dissolves into the image of W,

hinting at a reconciliation of W with her mother (V) and, in this way, W's "obsessive search for an other" relates her with the idea of the abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva (Rodríguez Gago 63): "something rejected from which one does not part" (Qtd. 63), "a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate" (Kristeva 6). Beckett's characters are struggling in such a (dark) 'deep well of memory' and it appears to be what Beckett himself is evoking, too.

'To be or not to be' is not a dilemma in these plays. Oppositions do not seem to exist but, rather, contribute to this idea of infinity and of cycles being repeated, cycles such as life (and death). In these three short plays everything contributes to the whole, even when it appears to be minimal or fragmented. Surprisingly, in such bleak, dreary and doomed settings a certain hope, humanity and tenderness can still be found.

This resembles the way in which Wim Wenders chose to depict angels and humans in his film *Wings of Desire* (1987). Wenders's cinematography shows the angels' world in black and white while the human's world is seen in colour. The angels' world seems gloomy, they are invisible creatures yet they perceive human existence and sympathise with the frail humans. Interestingly, the film opens with a hand that writes and then dissolves into an Extreme Close-Up of an eye reminiscent of Buster Keaton's eye in *Film*. Clearly, Beckett's imagery has influenced in many ways contemporary art (and films). Much has been written about art influencing Beckett's work, but Beckett has indeed been in the background of influential works or pop icons. For instance, the cult musical and horror-comedy film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. Jim Sharman, 1975) opens with a disembodied mouth singing against a black background. There is no doubt that in his quest for the 'almost abstract' and failures, Beckett 'almost tangibly' succeeded.

Beckett had a difficult relationship with his mother, which probably stems from Kemp and Loftus' claim that "she suffered from what can be classified as bipolar disorder, type 2" (656) and he must have been thinking about his ageing mother (just as O, May and W do) when he himself was approaching an 'in-between' state and facing old age. Knowlson expresses such concern in *Notfilm*:

[Beckett] once began to talk to me about old age and he said that he'd always hoped that old age, which he had associated with spirit and light, would actually bring him to a more truthful understanding of this ludicrous parabola from youth to old age, where you're going through knowledge and then realizing how little you know. And

I remember saying to him at the time, and this was when he was getting quite old: “and are you finding this, Sam?” And he thought for a moment and he said: “not really, not really.”

Only months before *Film* was made in New York, Schneider’s father passed away. Beckett revealingly wrote a condolence note to him in which he said: “I offer you only my deeply affectionate and compassionate thought that the strange thing may never fail you, whatever it is, that gives us the strength to live on and on with our wounds” (*Notfilm*). It is perhaps that “strange thing” what Beckett attempts to depict in his work. And it is to stubbornly “live on (and on) with our wounds” what he repeatedly stages. It is also due to it that his work is not overtly pessimistic. Humour saves his work from the serious philosophical and psychological readings he so desperately wants to avoid. That is also why Buster Keaton’s participation contributes to the different reactions or readings we might gather from *Film*.

Alan Schneider tragically died in an accident when he crossed the street to post a letter to Beckett (Harmon 489). In his conclusion to his own impressions regarding *Film*—which he compares to an abstract painting—he deals with the same sort of mixed feelings that Beckett’s late work stirs up:

Sometimes I loved it, and sometimes I hated it. Remembering that loss of the opening sequence, and all the things I didn’t do or did badly. [...] Yet, the film undoubtedly took on an ambience [...] that gave it depth and richness. Like an abstract painting, or one of Beckett’s plays, it grew on you. I was once told that British director Peter Brook had seen it somewhere and had said half of it was a failure and the other half successful. I’m inclined to agree, although I’m not sure we’d both pick the same half. (Schneider, par. 45)

Schneider is alluding to the ‘in-between’ nature in Beckett’s writing and, therefore, evokes the ‘not really,’ ‘not quite there,’ ‘almost,’ ‘by way of neither,’ ‘nothing [...] but was not that something?’ of Beckett’s ambiguous universe, where failure and success appear to hold hands.

## V. Conclusion

The findings of this research support the idea that the resulting aesthetics in the late plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* appear to be indebted to the experience of making *Film*.

Beckett had already expressed an interest in filmmaking to learn about “the scenario and editing end of the subject” (Leyda 59) and film was a new language for him to experiment with. He embarked on filmmaking by joining forces with the director, producer, director of photography, camera operator, designer, editor and actors. Together they confronted different challenges and ‘catastrophes’ and Beckett learned from the problems that came up as well as from everyone else’s craft. ‘Failure’ also led him to the creative option of cutting the opening scene, that is, to ‘subtract’ rather than to add. In the end, they managed to complete Beckett’s demanding project, where the author acted not only as screenwriter but also as a sort of director “from original concept to final cut,” as Schneider points out (par. 1). The bulkiness involved in making a film appears to have led Beckett to simplify things and, in this way, he further embraces the minimal in his future dramatic work and in his upcoming TV plays. Choosing TV as a medium right after making *Film* is also revealing. Beckett clearly makes the most of what he has learned. At the same time, editing (montage) gives a certain rhythm to a film and this appears to have made Beckett reflect too, especially given that he was musically inclined: in the future he makes a very careful use of noises and voices in his drama, and sound appears to guide his late plays in a similar way to how editing guides a film’s mood and pace. It is, therefore, interesting to regard Beckett’s late plays as pieces that were influenced not only by *Film* itself, but also by the art (and craft) of making a film.

Beckett’s work progresses chronologically, and each piece of writing draws an influence from what came before. In this way, *Play* (1963) seems to signal a desire to move towards the ‘abstract,’ which is probably why Beckett in *Film* (1964) seeks an ‘almost abstract’ setting. And it is after making *Film* when the author conceives highly interesting visual compositions and stage figures in his drama, where he favours a lonely protagonist (as O turned out to be in *Film*). The iconic figures Beckett creates in the three studied late plays are innovative due to their minimal appearance and solitary presence in the enveloping darkness, under carefully directed light. They seem to be intriguing paintings,

photographs or sculptures in motion and appear to be closer to the visual arts than to classical drama. The stage figures are also surprising because it is not all that relevant to understand what they are saying; their presence is what has an impact on the audience. However, the delivery (voice, intonation, rhythm) plus the sounds and pacing of the stage movements are most important, as might be inferred from Beckett's notes and detailed scenic directions. The slow metronome effect (tempo) in *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, or the fast speed of Mouth talking in *Not I*, might stand for heartbeats and for a state of mind, and it hints at the idea of (probably) being alive. These late stage figures just seem to somehow exist and it is indeed understandable that Beckett was asked by Billie Whitelaw when she played May in *Footfalls* whether she was alive or not. That is what O himself is wondering in *Film* when he repeatedly checks his pulse: 'Am I dead?' And this is the in-between area Beckett explores in his late drama by means of ghost-like figures that seem to live forever in a void, approaching death but never completely reaching their final resting place.

As Beckett ages, his characters age with him, similarly. The personal appears to show up in his creations in the same way as he clearly remembers (and describes) images that have stood out in his mind throughout the years. The presence of Beckett's late mother appears to be looming over these female protagonists, as well. His sensitivity seems to be condensing memories and feelings that he translates as images onstage. In doing so, he creates (writes, 'paints' and 'sculpts') a universe that is set between life and death, and he suggests an interrelation between such cycles, as expressed in *Waiting for Godot*: "the grave-digger puts on the forceps" (CDW 84) or just as W in *Rockaby* is "rocked from cradle to grave" (Knowlson 663).

The author is also consciously moving away from any intellectual and psychological explanations, he prefers to mock seriousness and instead favours dark humour. In his late drama his intention is to reach out for the audience's sensory perception and to provoke a visceral reaction. He is also quite forgiving with the human being and depicts its frailty with a certain tenderness and empathy.

Brater quotes T. S. Eliot's poem, "Burnt Norton," when analysing *Footfalls* (53) and, indeed, Eliot's line: "Footfalls echo in the memory" summarises that which 'echoes' in Beckett's mind and what his stage figures embody. It also stands for the characters' own memories 'echoing' and resounding in their on-stage and off-stage voices (or in O's own

mind as he looks at his family photographs or as he rocks himself). It might well stand for the impression that ‘echoes’ and lingers in the audience’s minds after watching these striking late plays, for as Jessica Tandy has put it: “I suspect you [the audience] will never forget it” (19).

It would be interesting to further explore the influence that Beckett’s late work and ‘iconic’ stage figures might have borne on contemporary art (literature, drama, film, video-art, painting, photography, sculpture). Not much has been written about to where his influence might be traced, and it is, indeed, open for many interpretations. It is also intriguing that the house where the productions meetings of *Film* took place had been commissioned by the ‘abstract expressionist’ artist Robert Motherwell, who later sold it to Barney Rosset (Beckett’s American publisher). Motherwell not only shared Beckett’s love of art and literature, as well as a deep admiration for James Joyce’s work, he also entitled one of his own paintings *Waiting for Samuel Beckett* in 1979-1981. Motherwell and Beckett appear to have met somewhere along the way and their aesthetics and ideas could have very well influenced each other. It remains to be properly researched.

After studying Beckett’s *Film* and the three plays, there is a feeling that the author was setting out to capture the images in his mind in the same way as painters do: to make such images physically available and to transmit them ‘visually.’ In this way, he resembles Vincent van Gogh, who used his art as a means of expression but also as a way to explore his own feelings. According to Jonathan Jones, Van Gogh began *La Berceuse* (his own *Rockaby*) just days before his self-mutilation and completed it after he left hospital, where he had obsessed about this painting “to the point that he was told that he sang a lullaby while delirious” (par. 5). However, just as Beckett’s three late plays, *La Berceuse*

is anything but sedative. It arouses and focuses the eye, creating a sense of transfiguration and drama. In the everyday act of a mother rocking a cradle, Van Gogh finds magic and ecstasy. In fact, he set out not to paint a portrait but an icon, a work of modern religious art for a mass audience. (Jones, par. 7)

It is precisely this sense of setting out to create an “icon” and a “sense of transfiguration and drama” with an “everyday act” (i.e. to talk, walk or rock) which Beckett succeeds to convey in his late drama. And the result is just as disquieting as Van Gogh’s work, yet as surprisingly appealing, evocative, and humane.

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