On Beckett's *Film*

Close-up, the Affection-Image, and Comedians [*1]
ベケットの『フィルム』─クロースアップ、情動イメージ、喜劇役者

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Introduction

Film is a motion picture whose script was written by Samuel Beckett, and directed by Alan Schneider. The theme is from George Berkeley's dictum, "Esse est percipi," which means "being is perceived."

If "being is perceived," the world outside the "perception" would be a state of "non-being." Is it possible? Beckett's *Film* tries to pursue this problem.

In this *Film*, a man (who is called "Object" in the script, and played by Buster Keaton) tries to flee from the perception and reach a state of non-being; however, he fails in the end, because he cannot evade perceiving himself.

This "alter ego" type of motif seems common, especially in modern literature; it is taken in many different works, such as Edgar Alan Poe's *The Crowd*. In this short novel, the protagonist sees a mysterious man, and follows him all through the night in London; finally, he discovers the man is himself; the protagonist who has been watching the man proves to be the man himself. In other words, the perceiving subject is the perceived object at the same time.

The similar motif is also frequent in Beckett's works. For example, in a later play, *A Piece of Monologue*, a man on stage talks about himself in both the first and the third person narrative. He is a talking subject, and at the same time, he is the object that his talk focuses on.

Although this seemingly common motif in Beckett's novel and play has been studied in various ways so far, it is not deeply analyzed concerning *Film*. Therefore, in this paper, I will describe how this motif is expressed, and in what sense, by focusing on the last scene of the film, in which the pursuing camera proves to be the man's alter ego. It will be described from three different perspectives:

(1) In the last scene where the perceiving subject is found the perceived object, what is Beckett trying to express?

(2) How is the last scene of *Film* related with film as a media genre? Is there any quality in film that other media do not have when dealing with the "alter ego" motif?

(3) With what method and by what kind of person should the motif be embodied?

The following sections 1 and 2 will give an answer to (1), and the section 3, (2). The section 4 will describe about (3).

1. Reality as a Criticism of Realism

In ordinary experiences, people are not confused about the difference between the act of perceiving and the perceived object. They keep switching their position between them. If so, when those two are integrated, is it not an ordinary experience?

We may be able to refer to Kantian philosophy, which makes a difference between the transcendental subject and the empirical one, but here instead, Beckett's own idea about the integration of subject and object must be followed.

In his "Proust," Beckett talks about the identification between the present experience and the past one. In everyday life, people differentiate their subjectivity from the objective life world, as Beckett describes:

…there is not "any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because

they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception, and the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive (*Proust* 74).

To the contrary, when action and reaction in the past are represented in the present, the difference between the two disappears because of their cooperation. At that moment, according to Beckett, the "essential reality" is liberated:

The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. Such participation frees the essential reality. (74)

The "essential reality" does not appear under our usual perception, in which past and present, the ideal and the real, are separated. Such perception must be "disarmed" in order to make the "essential reality" appear. This "essential reality" emerges in *Film*, because in the very last scene, Beckett tries to disarm the perception and identify subject (the perceiver, or the camera) and object (the perceived, or Keaton).
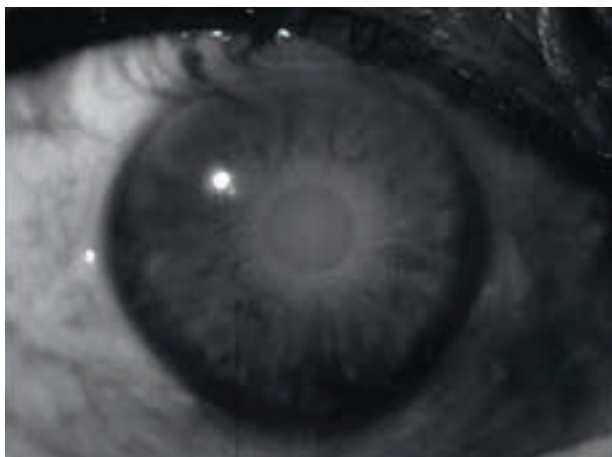

Figure 1. The eye in the last scene of *Film*

In the last scene, the image of an eye is the last shot (Figure 1). The audience cannot tell whether it is the perceiver's eye or the perceived one's. This last shot suggests the identification, the essential reality being revealed. The eye in this shot seems not related with the general perceptive faculty of human being because there is no object that the eye can see. However, the

man does not completely evade perception itself, because the eye has a potentiality of perception, which would start working in another way.

Concerning the relationship of perception with the "reality" Beckett describes, by referring to Baudlaire:

And he (Proust) understands the meaning of Baudlaire's definition of reality as 'the adequate union of subject and object', and more clearly than ever the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art— 'the miserable statement of line and surface', and the penny-a-line vulgarity of a literature of notations. (76)

Here, it is clear that Beckett criticizes realism in art and literature. Realism distorts the objective world through the prejudiced, subjective perception.

2. Close-up and the "Affection-image"

Self-perception, which is the main theme of *Film*, is impossible to experience directly, or immediately. We can perceive ourselves only when using such media as a mirror and a camera. These media can be tools of imitation, so they tend to create an image of "realism." In this sense, *Film* denies "realism" which distorts the objective world by imitating things, and it pursues the "essential reality."

Gilles Deleuze describes the identification between subject and object in *Film* as "affection-image" in his *Cinema*. Deleuze's ideas help us interpret Beckett's *Film* from the perspective of film theory.

Deleuze refers to Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, and creates two notions: movement-image and time-image. He divides the movement-image into three categories: perception-image, action-image, and affection-image. Deleuze sees a world as the accumulation of such images: in his view, image is not a delusion but a matter created by optical particles. It is not idea but substance. In this accumulation of images particles appear and disappear; they are organized and disorganized themselves. This process is what Deleuze calls the movement-image.

The perception-image is an act of human being, in which they try to be engaged in such an image-accumulated world. The perception image makes the world transform, and the world also influences the perception itself. Deleuze calls this process an "incurvation" of the world.

The action-image is the relationship between human behavior and environment. Human behavior influences their situation, and vice versa. In film, the action image is expressed in the coordinate of fixed time and space.

The affection-image is positioned in the interval between the perception image and the action image. It appears without the coordinate of time and space. As an example, Deleuze takes a close-up shot of a face. The close-up face is not related with an individual personality. It is a surface. However, it is not an indifferent, empty phenomenon, either.

Affects are not individuated like people and things, but nevertheless they do not blend into the indifference of the world. They have singularities which enter into virtual conjunction and each time constitute a complex entity. It is like points of melting, of boiling, of condensation, of coagulation, etc. This is why faces which express various affects, or the various points of the same affect, do not merge into a single fear which would obliterate them (obliterating fear is merely a limit-case). (*Cinema 1* 103)

If a close-up face is a typical expression of "affection," as Deleuze says, the close-up shot of Buster Keaton in the last scene of *Film* is its perfect example.

Naturally, Deleuze considers that Beckett's *Film* embodies his own taxonomy. According to Deleuze, the street and stairs scenes correspond to an action-image (Figures 2-3). The room scene corresponds to a perception-image, in which the man tries to hide from the eyes of animals or pictures (Figure 4). The last scene corresponds to an affection-image, in which the man is duplicated by switching the camera, or the subject and the object are overlapped.

The character O is thus now seen from the front,[⋯] the camera OE is the double of O, the same face, a patch over one eye (monocular vision), with the single difference that O has an anguished expression and OE has an attentive expression: the impotent motor effort of the one, the sensitive surface of the other. We are in the domain of the perception of affection, the most terrifying, that which still survives when all the others have been destroyed: it is the perception of self

by self, *affection-image*. (67-68)

Figure 2. The man going along the street

Figure 3. The stairs

Figure 4. The man is trying to get the cat out of the room.

Affection is a kind of uncertainty where perception does not work and any action does not come out yet (98). It is very similar to Beckett's notion of the "essential reality" in which the usual perception of subject becomes impossible.

According to the script, the theme of *Film* is "the

anguish of being perceived." It might be possible to say that the last scene, which Deleuze calls affection, is the ultimate form of its anguish. This anguish probably comes from an uncomfortable feeling people have when they find themselves not only perceiving something but also being perceived. Beckett's script describes: "All persons in opening scene to be shown in some way perceiving – one another, an object, a shop window, a poster, etc., i.e., all contentedly in *percipere* and *percipi*" (Beckett *Film* 12). This scene is edited in the film, but it implies that all the scenes are aiming at the last one, in which the "contented" perception breaks down and the ultimate anguish appears.

The "anguish" theme reminds us of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. Bergson asks in this book how affection comes from perception, and he takes anguish, or pain, as an example. "Every pain, then, must consist in an effort, -- an effort which is doomed to be unavailing. Every pain is a local effort, and in its very isolation lies the cause of its impotence" (56). Organism is struggling to erase the stimulation coming from the outside; however, our organic body sometimes cannot erase it but absorb it. Bergson sees the cause of affection in such a state of organic body which fails in rejecting the stimulation. In that sense, the affection in *Film* appears when the organic circulation of the perceiving - perceived relationship is broken by the camera.

Bergson says, "Suppose the distance [between our perception of an object and our body] reduced to zero, that is to say that the object to be perceived coincides with our body, that is to say again, that our body is the object to be perceived. Then it is no longer virtual action, but real action, that this specialized perception will express: and this is exactly what affection is" (58). This statement is exactly true of the last scene of *Film*.

Thus, what Beckett tried to express in that scene is, in his own term, the "essential reality"; according to Deleuze's concept, it is the "affection-image," which is originated in Bergsonian "pain" or "real action."

3. Film as a mode expressing the "identification" motif

The identification between subject (the perceiver) and object (the perceived) is not uncommon in Beckett's works, nor is his objection to "realism." His novels, plays, or radio plays take such motif and method more

or less. Then, does film as a mode of expression make any difference from other genres when expressing the motif of the subject-object identification and going against "realism"?

In film, there may be two features that other genres do not have. First, in film, close-up shots can focus on one's facial expression. In that sense, it is easier for film to express what Deleuze calls "affection" than other genres.

Second, in film, two types of "eyes," a character's and a camera's, are functioning; sometimes they are distanced, and sometimes they are overlapped. While in novels the narrator's narrative tend to unify the different perspectives of characters (and in plays a person would do the same thing), in film, plural perspectives tend to be disclosed. This indicates that film is appropriate for expressing the "essential reality" or "affection" caused by the duality of the subject's and the object's eyes.

3.1 Close-up Face

A film theorist Béla Balázs describes a close-up method as follows: human face has a combination of "destiny" and "soul," type and personality, the native and the acquired, fate and will, Es and Ich, and they are fighting against each other on the face. The profound secret of his/her internal life would appear on it.

Face has not only an outside feature but also an internal feeling on it. That is why, Balázs says, the motif of the alter ego leads to a true "reality" when it is expressed in film. In film, through visual images, the audience can see one's plural "selves" reflecting their different feelings on his / her face.

Balázs's theory would support Beckett's idea "essential reality" and Deleuze's notion "affection-image." Film can visualize self and other at the same time. Balázs points out that film shares one of depth psychology's themes: how one can be oneself, as well as the other. This is very similar to *Film*'s motif: how one can be seen by oneself, as well as the other.

According to Balázs, facial expression is polyphonic. One's various inner feelings emerge on face at one time. A close-up face in film expresses those feelings, or affection. In novels, words have to treat characters' feelings one by one, so they need consecutiveness rather than simultaneity. In plays, face cannot be seen close-up, so feelings expressed on it

are hard to reach the audience without words or body movement. In this sense, film is more appropriate than other media to express the motif of the identification between the perceiver and the perceived. The plural aspects on a close-up of a face make it possible to describe the struggle between the perceiver and the perceived, or subject and object.

3.2 Distanced Eyes

The audience is used to filling the gap between a camera's eye and a character's point of view; watching a screen, they switch their perspectives one after the other and apply them to the world within it. In other words, the audience is conditioned to see things in the "realist" perspective or adjust themselves to the "realist" frame of reference.

As described above, Beckett suggested that in Proust there is an anti-realist point of view, and such a view is embodied in Beckett's own works. In order to take an anti-realist view, a seamless perspective must be broken in some way. In *Film*, Beckett tried to break it in the last scene by overlapping the camera eye and the protagonist's. The audience is forced to be conscious of the existence of the camera from the opening scene, and they keep feeling the distance between the camera eye and the protagonist's all through the film.

Is this kind of experience unusual in cinema history? Of course not. We can keep track of the genealogy of works which take an anti-realist view and make the audience conscious of the camera eye, such as Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*.[*2]

One good example is Jean-Luc Godard's *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, although it does not exactly take an alter-ego motif; the main character is both a housewife and a fancy woman. She plays two social roles. Playing several roles in a society is not strange, but in this movie, it becomes more complicated because the movie reveals in the opening scene the fact that an actress plays the role of the housewife. After that, the audience cannot help being conscious of the distance between the character and the actress herself. They cannot identify themselves with the woman either, because they would hesitate to choose which one they are going for, the housewife, the fancy lady, or the actress. [*3]

Beckett's *Film* also belongs to this type of camera-conscious works. Repeatedly, in *Film*, the camera eye and the main character's eyes express the doubled perspectives of the same man.

Technically, in *Film*, when the camera functions as the man's view, the lens is filtered. When the camera functions as a camera (which later proves to be the man's other self's eye), the filter is revealed. Even in the last scene where the perceiving camera and the perceived man are being identified, the distance between them is kept by changing their facial expression (Figures 5-6).

Figure 5. The man finds he has been chased by himself.

Figure 6. "The other self" who has chased the man himself.

Thus, Beckett as well as Godard makes eyes doubled in his work of film. Why? It is because he tries not to make such different eyes unified in the perceiver's own perspective. If they are unified, the perspective would be a "realist" one in which the perceived object is reduced to the perceiver's subject. In Balázs's terms, the unification disturbs "polyphonic" perspectives which should be presented in *Film*.

Beckett originally had an intention of using film technology in order to realize such polyphony. The

script says: "Throughout first two parts all perception is E's. E is the camera. But in the third part there is O's perception of room and contents and at the same time E's continued perception of O. This poses a problem of images which I cannot solve without technical help" (11-12). In order to show in the film that E and O which seem to have different eyes are actually from the same man, he suggested as follows: "This difference of quality might perhaps be sought in different degrees of development, the passage from the one to the other being from greater to lesser and lesser to greater definition or luminosity" (58).

In this way, film has its own method of expressing the alter-ego type of scenes: the camera. Beckett positively attempted to make use of it in order to reach the "essential reality," which can be paraphrased as "affection image" or is almost equated with "the ultimate anguish of being perceived." In novels and plays, such thing can be expressed in their own ways, but *Film* dealt with it in a different form.

4. Facial Expression in Silent *Film*: Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton

To reach an anti-realist realm, or express an affection-image, Beckett did two important things. One is to make the film silent. The other is to star a genius comedy actor.

Why was the film made silent? It is because words uttered by a character would conceal the "essential reality" or "affection." Flight from perception would fail if words were uttered, because the function of words is to keep things in order from a certain perspective. In order to be free from the perception and reach the realm of "essential reality," words can be a disturbance. Therefore, in the middle of the film, there is a scene in which one character prevents another from uttering his voice (Figures7-8).

Silence is closely related with Keaton's facial expression as the embodiment of the "essential reality" or "affection." Here, we may refer to Ernst Cassirer's theory of myth and expression in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He describes myth as a state of fluidity not being divided into subject, object, and other categories. In the mythical world, "a reality is not "actualized" through the mediation of the phenomenon but is present in full actuality in the phenomenon" (68).

Such reality is, according to Cassirer, "a vast diversity of original physiognomic characters. As a whole and in its parts the world still has a distinctive face, which may be apprehended at any moment as a totality and can never be dissolved into mere universal configurations, into geometrical and objective lines and shapes."

Figure 7. The gentleman with moustache is about to speak.

Figure 8. The lady stops the man uttering his voice.

What breaks and destroys this totality is language. Cassirer describes this as a move from "the sphere of expression to that of representation."

If we seek the origin of this breakdown, of this differentiation and articulation, we find ourselves led beyond the sphere of expression to that of representation, beyond the spiritual region in which myth is preeminently at home, into the region of language. Only in the medium of language do the infinite diversity, the surging multiformity of expressive experiences begin to be fixated; only in language do they take on "name and shape." The proper name

of the god becomes the origin of the personal figure of the god; and through its mediation, through the representation of the personal god, the representation of man's own I, of his "self" is first found and secured. (77)

Cassirer's idea of myth accounts for Keaton's expression of "essential reality" from the perspective of symbolic theory. According to Cassirer, language organizes chaotic world of myth, by which the personality of god appears and his "self" or subject is established.

What Beckett made Keaton express in the last scene of *Film* can be considered as a chaos before this organizing process, which Cassirer called myth. That is why this film should be silent. The use of language makes it hard for the protagonist to reach the chaos, and if he speaks, then, his self is found. It is far from the "essential reality" in which subject - object relationship is dissolved.

In this sense, starring a comedian / comedienne is effective, because their expression and body action are inclined to break up the cosmos, in which the perceiver and the perceived, or subject and object relationship is in order. Historically, the origin of such comic expression and action is considered to be in Italian commedia dell'arte. It made use of the masks on characters' faces and exaggerate their body movement, because they acted and became popular mainly in France, where their Italian language could not be conveyed to the audience. Beckett might have recognized this comedian's non-verbal function. In fact, in his plays, characters always fail in making logical and rhetorical sentences, and they are regarded as vaudevillians.

For *Film*, as is well known, it was expected that Charlie Chaplin would play the man fleeing from the camera. As a result, they could not cast him, but it was natural for them to ask for Chaplin because his origin was in silent films, and even in English music hall, although he appeared in talkie films in his late carreer. Balázs describes about Chaplin's being "against the talkie" before *Modern Times*. "Charlie had to be silent, for he was locked into his own grotesque mask, a mask which he had invented for himself and the success and popularity of which imprisoned him like an iron mask and would not let him go (238)".

Chaplin's mask cannot coexist with his voice. If Balázs's idea is true, it is clear that Chaplin is appropriate for playing the role of the man in *Film*.

However, it might have been fortunate to fail in casting Chaplin, because Keaton's poker face is considered more appropriate to be "against the talkie." [*4] As is well known, Keaton hardly expresses his feeling on his face, while we often see Chaplin's mask reflecting his sentimentality and it sometimes takes the "grotesque" form, as Balázs pointed out. Feeling and sentimentality are the products of one's inner mind, so they are inclined to be subjective. The inclination to subject would prevent *Film* from reaching the realm of "essential reality" where subject-object relationship exists no longer. In this sense, Keaton's frozen expression seems to embody the realm better, and in *Film*, it actually does.

Conclusion
The "alter-ego" motif is often seen in both literature and cinema; the problem is how Beckett expressed such motif or what kind of mode or method he took to do so. As described above, he expressed the motif as embodying his idea of "essential reality," which is contrary to an ordinary perspective of realism. In a realist worldview, the subject perceives, and the object is perceived. Such dichotomy must be denied to grab the "essential reality." This is what Beckett tried to express in the mode of film, as he did in other works, too.

The essential reality can be paraphrased as "affection," which Bergson described as pain in a body. Gilles Deleuze extended this Bergson's idea to his film theory as an affection-image. The affection is not a subjective feeling or sentiment, but a state of jolting in one's body.

In *Film*, Bergson's pain is expressed as an anguish of being perceived. This anguish is not from an inner feeling. It is embodied in the main character's fleeing from the camera and their overlapped "eye" in the very last scene.

In order to present such image of affection, film has a unique method: close-up. In the last scene of *Film*, this technique is effectively used. Balázs sees the technique as a method of effacing the line between self and other, or subject and object; a close-up face expresses both. We cannot tell whether he/she is

perceiving or perceived. The close-up face is both the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Balázs calls this pluralist mode of expression as polyphonic.

What is more, Beckett took another method of reaching the sphere of the "essential reality" : making the film silent. As indicated in Cassirer's symbolic theory, language helps establish one's self, or subject. In that sense, a voice prevents the man from becoming "non-being." That is why Beckett and his coworkers tried to cast an experienced comedian in silent film, such as Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, who were both more skilled in controlling the face and body movement than in the use of language.

Thus, Beckett's idea of the "essential reality" is embodied with the help of close-up technique which is unique to film, and the comedian whose face is never influenced by any language or sentimental feeling, but just expresses the "affection."

Notes

*1.　This paper is based on the oral presentation "On *Film*," delivered for the symposium "Beckett and Media" in IASIL Japan 24th International Conference at Kobe Shinwa Women's University, Oct 27th, 2007.

*2.　It seems not coincident that Boris Kaufman, Vertov's brother, is the director of photography in *Film*.

*3.　The similarity between Beckett and Godard is analyzed in Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*.

*4.　In this sense, Simon Critchley's phrase, "sadness of aging face," is not appropriate for describing Keaton in *Film*.

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