# Anti-Theatre on Film

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The historical avant-gardes were instrumental in finalizing the most important paradigm shift in recent history -- the decline of the logocentric conception of reality, the shattering of Idealism, the transvaluation of values. In the first decades of the twentieth century, under the increasing influence of philosophies of becoming or vitalism (Bergson) and new discoveries in physics (such as the argument that atoms are merely convenient 'mental symbols' humans impose on 'an energetic universe' in which, however, isolated things do not exist), the logocentric view of reality gave way to an "energetic view of reality" (Sheppard, 2000: 36). Artists were aware of such scientific discoveries as evidenced by the explicit references to the relativity of time or to Brownian movement in Futurist and Dada manifestos (by Marrinetti and Tristan Tzara). Painters renounced the fixed point of perspective they had inherited from the Renaissance, while writers experimented with limited or unreliable narrators, blurring the distinctions between author, character and narrator, relying on a whole range of intertextual devices, and challenging the privileged mode of relationship to the work of art – contemplation -- through various defamiliarization techniques that demanded from spectators a reflective and critical appraisal of their own reception of the work. As Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* unsettled common assumptions about the representational power of language, both poets and fiction writers moved "away from the noun-based syntax that implies the reality of (illusory) things…[toward] a more active syntax based on transitive verbs," a shift that was intimately related to the Bergsonian idea of reality as governed by an élan vital. (Shepherd, 2000: 113)

Though Beckett's work can be easily situated in the context of this fragmentation of linguistic confidence, it is also a significant departure from Bergson's belief that the failure to represent reality, to subordinate it to ordinary syntax, linear logic, and the power of reason, is actually a gain as it forces us to humbly open ourselves to a world that far exceeds the limits of rational comprehension, a world that remains ultimately (and fortunately, for Bergson) unsayable. The roots of Beckett's anti-theatre should be sought rather in the Dadaists' and the Futurists' critique of the bourgeois concept of art as high culture destined for the narcissistic, philistine delectation of the middle class; in their intolerance for symbolism; in their emphasis on chance and random events; and especially in their fascination with "functionless machines," language being one of them. In this respect, Beckett is closer to the Dadaists than to the Futurists. Futurist poets, for all their ecstatic references to a 'universal dynamism,' still subscribed to the belief that there is "a homology between noun-based syntax and thing-based (molecular) reality." (Shepherd, 2000: 127) Although they recommended using language in a non-instrumental fashion, the Futurists ultimately reaffirmed the belief that poetic language, stripped of its instrumentality, could tap into a spiritual substratum underlying the material world.

Dada nonsense poetry, on the other hand, hovered somewhere in-between linguistic mimesis and pure sound. Dada was motivated by two opposing impulses: on the one hand, the Saussurean idea of the arbitrary connection between language and world and, on the other

hand, the desire to "create a redeemed, adamic language in which pristine words, untarnished by corrupt misuse, have a necessary connection with the things they name." (Shepherd, 2000: 136) The difference between Dada nonsense poetry and Beckett's reification of language (especially in the later plays) is that between nonsense and the absurd. Dada nonsense poetry (for instance, Hugo Ball's poem "Karawane" which begins with "jolifanto bambla o falli bambla" and ends with an emphatic "ba -- umf") can, no doubt, be characterized as absurdist. However, Beckett's absurdist works are not necessarily nonsensical because the sense of the absurd is grounded in a particularly well-developed (to the point of enervation) moral sense, whereas morality is not constitutive of nonsense. The Dadaists' experiments with language (the Dada poème statiste, the Dada poème simultane, the optophonetic poem, intonarumori (noise-machines), or bruitist poetry) were designed to shock the *viewers* (these were poem-performances rather than poem-texts). Beckett, on the other hand, sought to unsettle or estrange them. Even as they blatantly destroyed referentiality and meaningfulness, the Dadaists insisted on developing a system of specific rules for the performance of nonsense poems, rules that were, paradoxically, designed to make what seemed like incomprehensible nonsense actually comprehensible. Berlin Dada poet Raoul Hausemann explained the optophonetic poem in the following way:

> Every unit of this poem is purely independent and acquires an aural value according to whether the letter, the sounds, the concentrations of consonants are handled using a higher or lower pitch, more loudly or more quietly. In order to be able to depict this typographically, I chose letters of differing sizes or strengths as substitutes for musical notes. (Sheppard, 2000: 140)

Reading or experiencing a Dada poem was predicated on the understanding that certain semantic boundaries had been crossed, i.e. there was a certain suspension of disbelief at work that actually counterbalanced the intended shock effect.

The Dadaists' discordant performances figured nonsense as the other side of language and kept the absurd at a safe distance. Beckett, Ionesco, and the *nouveau roman* writers (Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute) did not have to chant "Umba! Umba!" -- as Zurich Dada poet Huelsenbeck did in his poem "Negergedichte" -- if they wanted to convey the absurdity of language. Beckett and Ionesco were not concerned with transforming nonsense into a new, self-sufficient language. Instead of transporting the reader/viewer to 'the other side of language', from where its arbitrariness could be observed, they forced him to become estranged *within* language, and often within the most banal uses of language. Rather than inverting, subverting, or refusing sense, Beckett and Ionesco drew attention to the fact that nonsense is often indistinguishable from sense taken literally. Accordingly, in their works basic dramatic conventions were not discarded but rather literalized: the characters in *The Bald Soprano* do not signify or refer to the failure of communication (simple misunderstanding) but enact this failure in the very act of communicating (they actually find it hard to stop talking). Beckett and Ionesco understood that if they were to comment on the unrepresentability of reality, the inauthenticity of language, or the failure of communication, such comments would have to be enacted, i.e. *techniques* of representations would have to be continually reexamined as *objects* of representation.

Despite the anti-aesthetic agenda it shares with Dada (e.g. exposing the arbitrariness of language, challenging the classical idea of reality as essentially anthropomorphic and, particularly in the case of Ionesco, the traces of Dada primitivism, i.e. the interest in mundane

situations provoking extreme, even murderous emotions), anti-theatre invites a closer comparison with *nouveau roman's* minimalism. The minimalism of Beckett's later fictive and dramatic works -- "the decrease in length, number of characters and physical space," the "ghosting of language," or the gradual displacement of language onto the increasing "poeticization of *mise-en-scène*" -- demonstrates Beckett's growing preoccupation with the visual as a dramatic prototype. (Oppenheim, 2003: 56 and 24) Not only does Oppenheim interpret minimalism literally, as "fewer words," but he considers it proof of the truthfulness of Hegel's dictum that "art is a thing of the past," a thesis "resurrected" recently by Arthur Danto. According to Hegel, art has reached its end when it self-consciously internalizes its own history, when, in an attempt to return to its own origins, it asks "What Is Art?" Art dissolves into philosophy of art or aesthetics when it reproduces within itself its most fundamental problem, the problem of representation, i.e. when it transforms *techniques* of representation into *objects* of representation. Oppenheim considers the resistance to narrativity and the domination of image over word in Beckett's later plays analogous to Pop art's problematization of representation (note the well disguised, unexamined assumption on which Oppenheim's entire argument rests: of course in order to argue that minimal language and emphasis on the visual is a sign of the "problematization of representation" in theatre, Oppenhein must assume that the "essence" of theatre is precisely language so that any deviation from it, such as "the ghosting of language" in Beckett's later plays, automatically becomes a symptom of the end of art, or, in this case, the end of theatre). From Oppenheim's point of view, then, the dissolution of the differences between the arts prefigures the end of art. Thus, he concludes that wherever the visual paradigm dominates, as in Pop art or in Beckett's late minimalist works, "the result is a self-reflexivity that impedes expression in both." (Oppenheim, 2003: 59) This argument rests on extremely rigid and ultimately indefensible definitions of "image" and "word" that need to be challenged (See Appendix).

Although Oppenheim upholds the binary understanding of word and image, his critical study has contributed to a significant shift in Beckett criticism -- from poststructuralist to phenomenological readings -- by drawing attention to "the visual paradigm" in Beckett's later plays and novels, many of which often fall silent and become concentrated in a single, usually immobile, stage-image sculpted through extremely specific stage directions and subtle interactions of light and darkness. Beckett's growing interest in the visual (the space of the stage and the image of the actor's body on the stage), which he shares with the nouveau roman writers, is an attempt to distill the events on the page/stage from the influence of any prior constructs of reality, to diminish the relevance of narrative and verisimilitude, and to foreground the presence of the observing subject which often remains hidden in naturalist fiction and drama, "to reunite the object of perception with a visually perceiving subject." (Oppenheim, 2003: 30) However, this stress on the visual as a prototype is best described "as the substitution of an ontological for an objective (or descriptive) vision," for these writers are not interested in dutifully describing objective reality but in creating concentrated images of existential states. (Oppenheim, 2003: 34) Accordingly, Martin Esslin describes the theatre of the absurd as:

> a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and therefore it uses language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech. …The action in the play of the Theatre of the Absurd is not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images. (Esslin, 1983: 402-403)

Most Beckett criticism has focused almost exclusively on Beckett's language "variously exposed as anti-language, metalanguage, or metatheatrical language," ignoring the most essential aspect of nouveau théâtre, "the textual design of the character as a corporeal presence and visual image on the stage." (Essif, 2001: 3) Accordingly, Essif proposes a phenomenological approach to Beckett's plays, one that takes into consideration the corporeal existence of the theatrical image in place of the dominant semiotic one. Such an approach is better equipped to examine what Essif regards as the most important contribution of twentieth century dramatists to theatre -- their development of "a new poetics of space for the text, one based on emptiness" and the connection that postwar French avant-garde theatre in particular established between empty theatrical space and an empty inner space. (Essif, 2001: 19) This empty inner space accounts for the curiously backward nature of actors' performances in Beckett stage productions: "It is true… that a surprising number of excellent performances develop, as it were, backwards -- beginning with external physical techniques and working inward toward psychological centers." (Kalb, 1989: 39) Beckett's conception of character, which one also recognizes in New Wave cinemas of the 1960s, especially in the films of Jean-Luc Godard, is rooted in the existentialist notion of the subject. Robbe-Grillet's discussion of *Waiting for Godot* points to the existentialist underpinnings of this new conception of character/subject as absolutely free:

> The dramatic character, in most cases, merely plays a role, like the people around us who evade their own existence. In Beckett's play, on the contrary, everything happens as if the two tramps were on stage without having a role. They are there; they must explain themselves. But they do not seem to have a text prepared beforehand and scrupulously learned by heart, to support them. *They must invent. They are free*.  (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 120-121, my italics)

The subject/the fictional character is not the sum of pre-existing motivations of which it is perfectly aware; rather the subject reveals itself through gestures and concrete actions the motives for which, as Sartre has demonstrated in *Being and Nothingness*, are posited only retrospectively. Beckett's refusal to answer any questions about the motivation of his characters is a tacit admission that the sheer presence of the actors' bodies on stage, particularly of bodies presented as physically confined and extremely vulnerable, *is* the significant situation.

Beckett's growing preoccupation with the visual or corporeal nature of the stage image, his growing "respect for the naked stage," and his minimalist or anti-psychological understanding of character were all part of a general process of self-purging that the arts undertook in the decades after the war, a process that involved the critical re-examination of dramatic, cinematic, and painting conventions, an attempt on the part of each art to return to its origins and evaluate the criteria based on which it had so far differentiated itself from the other arts. (Essif, 2001: 25) Painting investigated its own gestural nature, the phenomenology of color, and the uses of the canvas. Experimental cinema engaged in a sort of obsessive self-cataloging of film techniques, which became its newly found subject matter. Painters stared at the canvas rather than through it, filmmakers stared at the zoom lens instead of seeing the object they were zooming in on, and dramatists stared at the stage rather than at the scene they were supposed to be staging. This fascination with emptiness can be traced back to symbolist theatre (Maurice Maeterlinck's bare stage and minimal sets) and surrealist theatre (the articulation of the empty psyche in Antonin Artaud and Andre Breton).

Ironically, such self-proclaimed abstinence produced an effect that was the exact opposite of the one intended: superself-conscious, self-reflexive works *about* painting (e.g. abstract expressionism), *about* cinema (e.g. structural film), *about* literature (the literature of exhaustion, metafiction), *about* theatre (Beckett's and Ionesco's anti-theatre). While the purpose of this self-purification had been to reaffirm the 'essential' differences between the arts, the return to the 'origin' merely exposed the falsity of any rigid distinctions between the arts. As cinema took to examining what it believed to be purely cinematic techniques, it deviated from the dominant idea of cinema -- a visual medium for telling stories -- and explored its own painterly and poetic potential; theatre moved away from the prioritization of characterization through speech and action and, following cinema's example, explored the visual, corporeal aspect of the theatrical image; finally, painting sought to imagine a kind of off-screen (off-frame) space similar to that in cinema (e.g. by foregrounding the act of painting, as in action painting, or by trying to make the spectator's visceral experience of color into a work of art itself). In other words, the so called temporal arts (e.g. cinema and theatre) were in the process of redefining themselves as spatial/visual arts (cinema refused to tell stories and theatre became interested in the architecture of the stage and in the creation of images out of words), while a plastic or spatial art like painting was trying to reclaim its temporal dimension (e.g. abstract expressionism reconceived the painting as an event rather than an object).

Thus, the very preconditions for sense experience -- a reader's or spectator's sense of time and space -- became the new subject matter of the arts. The result? A "surly discourse" exemplified by Beckett's "inhibited reading" ("a writer who may not wish to be read"), Rothko's "blocked vision" ("a painter, who may not wish to be seen"), and Resnais's "stalled movement" ("a maker of movies in which movement seems designed to immobilize us"). (Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 4) The "surliness" in question refers to the deliberate de-narrativization of time and space in avant-garde art. Beckett's plays are catalogs of techniques for falsely narrativizing time, sustaining talk despite the absence of anything to talk about. Similarly, space becomes de-narrativized when the very precondition for painting objects -- the belief in our ability to distinguish between separate bodies -- turns into the object of representation. Under these circumstances, the object of representation merely distracts the viewer from the true work of art, namely the very conditions that make the work of art possible in the first place:

> By painting nothing but variations on the form of his surface, Rothko appeared to be making a choice for a visuality from which no subject could distract us: neither the implied narratives of traditional art nor the implicit perceptual realism of cubist distortions nor even, as in Pollock and Kline, the gestural work of the painter himself. It is as if Rothko were taking the painter's framing of space as literally as possible, as an act preparatory to nothing more substantial than a visual focusing…[thus drawing our attention to] the difficulty of the very act of seeing. (Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 104)

The new object of avant-garde painting, cinema, and drama is the act of seeing itself.

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A long-standing argument in film studies is the idea that movement is essential to cinema. Even more influential has been the belief, often associated with the Soviet school of montage

(Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov), that editing (rather than simply the movement of people and things before the camera) constitutes the essence of movement in cinema:

> I claim that every object, taken from a given viewpoint and shown on the screen to spectators, is a dead object, even though it has moved before the camera. The proper movement of an object before the camera is yet no movement on the screen, it is no more than raw material for the future building-up, by editing, of the movement that is conveyed by the assemblage of the various strips of film. Only if the object be placed together among a number of separate objects, only if it be presented as part of a synthesis of different separate visual images, is it endowed with filmic life. (Pudovkin, 1949: xiv-xv)

If the supposed 'essence' of the cinematic medium has often been identified with editing, the prevalent conception of theatre has given priority to the dramatic significance of language, i.e. to its narrative and expressive function. From this point of view, which essentially applies Pudovkin's line of reasoning to theatre, it is only when the words and sentences in a play are assembled in a specific way -- so that they express the characters' psychology and push forward the action -- that language has been used dramatically. Thus, we find the same implicit assumption underlying the conception of both arts: in both cinema and theatre "development" or "progression" is assumed to be of the utmost importance, whether in the sense of an assemblage of individual shots that acquire their meaning only in virtue of their relationship to other shots (cinema) or in the more oblique sense of dramatic development (theatre).

It is precisely this subordination of the part to the whole, this allegorical conception of art, that the avant-gardes have challenged. The task of avant-garde cinema and theatre has been to liberate the particular -- individual shots and sentences -- from the expectation of signifying something other than itself. Paradoxically, precisely by foregrounding the particular image, word, or sentence as meaningful in themselves, avant-garde cinema and theatre aspire to, and achieve, a level of abstraction that would have been impossible to achieve by means of the conventional subordination of the particular to the universal (e.g. of the shot to the sequence, or of the scene to the overall dramatic structure of a play). The reason for this paradox is that by privileging the particular (images and language as "things" rather than as means of representation) avant-garde cinema and theatre become self-reflexive and, therefore, abstract.

When Ionesco wrote *The Bald Soprano* in 1950, he called it an "anti-play," automatically posing the question "What is theatre?" The question "What is… (cinema, theatre, painting etc.)?" can be paraphrased as "What are the conventions that have developed and determined a particular art, distinguishing it from the other arts?" Faced with the daunting task of defining something as broad as "cinema," "theatre" or "art," we might find it helpful to narrow down the object of our definition. Defining first the concept of genre, as a subset of conventions, might illuminate the evolution of a whole art form (cinema or theatre) as a set of conventions. According to one common model of film genre evolution, every genre has its own "life-cycle": "Genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious and to self-destruct." (Schatz, 1981: 21) A genre passes through a phase of self-definition (an experimental phase during which the conventions of the genre are established), followed by a classical stage (relying on audience expectations or, in hermeneutic terms, on existing horizons of interpretations) until, arriving at a self-reflective stage, it grows tired of its own

predictability and collapses into self-parody and intertextuality. At this stage a genre tends to exploit the cinematic medium *as a medium*:

> [When] the genre's straightforward message has "saturated" the audience…the genre evolves into…the age of refinement…[and] its transparency gradually gives way to *opacity*: we no longer look *through* the form…rather we look *at the form itself* to examine and appreciate its structure and its cultural appeal. (Schatz, 1981: 38, emphasis in the original)

Self-consciousness is always a later stage in the evolution of a genre or an art form (the development of human consciousness follows the same model: from unreflected to reflected consciousness).

This model of genre evolution can be mapped onto the relationship between theatre and anti-theatre, the difference between which can be conceived as that between showing and telling or between narrating and describing. Given that art becomes self-reflexive when it treats its own material or medium as subject matter, theatre seems to follow this progression from absorption to alienation: anti-theatre, which chronologically follows theatre, works through various techniques of alienation, intentionally not allowing the audience to become absorbed in the spectacle. The evolution of cinema, however, goes not from absorption to alienation, but from alienation (theatricality, pictorialism) to absorption (the narrativization of cinema as a result of the development of editing), with elements of pictorialism or theatricality popping up at later stages (e.g. special effects as a sort of throwback to the pictorialism of silent cinema). What facilitates the absorption of the audience in a temporal piece of art is time itself or, more precisely, delay. Both narrative cinema and traditional theatre work through delay, the delay of future events and thus of the significance of events currently represented. To be "absorbed" means to experience filmic or dramatic time on analogy with one's own duration (one's unreflective experience of time). Whenever the flow of time is arrested on the stage or on the screen, the spectator is prevented from spontaneously drawing such an analogy and instead is made aware of his own duration. When time is arrested in anti-plays, the effect is, therefore, unavoidably paradoxical: time "stops" or one has the impression that nothing is happening but, at the same time, one becomes aware of one's internal time which usually remains outside reflective consciousness. *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes this experience (in this sense Beckett's play is a kind of meta-play). Usually, when we are waiting for something, our attention is directed towards the thing we are waiting for. In an anti-play, however, the act of waiting shifts our attention from the object of waiting to that which prevents us from getting to it. Insofar as waiting already implies an object or a goal, while, on the other hand, an anti-play provides no such object or goal, one could say that an anti-play focuses our attention on that which *prevents us from waiting even as we are waiting*, namely language.

Despite the different paths cinema and theatre have followed -- from absorption to alienation (theatre) and from alienation to absorption (cinema) -- film history and criticism have always been inextricably connected to theatre history and criticism. In her essay "Film and Theatre" Susan Sontag writes:

> The history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models. First of all from theatrical 'frontality' (the unmoving camera reproducing the situation of the spectator of a play fixed in his seat), then from theatrical acting (gestures needlessly stylized, exaggerated -- needlessly

because now the actor could be seen 'close up'), then from theatrical furnishings (unnecessary 'distancing' of the audience's emotions, disregarding the opportunity to immerse the audience in reality). Movies are regarded as advancing from theatrical stasis to cinematic fluidity, from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and immediacy. (Sontag, 1974: 359)

She goes on to argue against the common, biased view of cinema as "the art of the authentic" and of theatre as the art of pretense. (Sontag, 1974: 362) Although these ideas are meant to support Sontag's larger argument -- a defense of experimental film -- her reflections on the theatrical and the cinematic prefigure Tom Gunning's more recent critique of the evolutionary approach to the history and theory of cinema according to which "the development of film… usually takes the dramatic form of a liberation of film from a false homology that restricted it to the technological reproduction of theatre." (Gunning, 2004: 42) Gunning's work on silent cinema aims at disabusing viewers and film scholars of what he calls the "cinematic" and "narrative" assumptions that have thus far dominated film scholarship, especially that portion of it which explores the relationship between cinema and theatre. According to the cinematic assumption, cinema discovered its purely cinematic essence only when filmmakers began moving the camera thereby transcending the artlessness of early films, which were nothing more than static shots of a single, continuous, usually repetitive action (for example, waves breaking on the beach, workers leaving the factory, passengers waiting for the train, etc). According to the narrative assumption, which became dominant through Christian Metz's semiological writing on cinema, "cinema only truly appeared when it discovered the mission of telling stories." (Gunning, 2004: 42) Jean Mitry was instrumental in establishing the narrative assumption when he defined silent cinema as "a struggle between theatricality and narrativity." (Gunning, 2004: 42)

"Theatricality" in silent cinema refers to the "foregrounding of the act of display" at the expense of narrative development. (Gunning, 2004: 42) Classical (narrative) cinema and "the cinema of attractions" (Gunning's term "attractions" refers to any non-narrative material) address and construct the spectator very differently. In the classical paradigm, "the spectator is rarely acknowledged, an attitude exemplified by the stricture against the actor's look or gestures at the camera/spectator." (Gunning, 2004: 43-44) The classical spectator is thus "modeled on the voyeur, who watches in secret, without the scene he watches acknowledging his presence." (Gunning, 2004: 44) A perfect instance of this would be the construction of the spectator through the continuity system of editing in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). On the other hand, attractions "invoke an exhibitionist rather than a voyeuristic regime." (Gunning, 2004: 44) The "attractions" of silent cinema -- for example, the extreme close up of the gun in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) -- are "displayed with the immediacy of a 'Here it is! Look at it!'" (Gunning, 2004: 44) They draw attention to themselves by refusing to be subordinated to, and dissolved in, a narrative structure. It is namely in this respect that anti-theatre -- specifically Beckett's and Ionesco's anti-theatre or theatre of the absurd -- is reminiscent of silent cinema: images in silent cinema do not obey the law of narrative and, similarly, language in anti-theatre does not obey the law of dramatic, narrative development. While "[a]ttractions' fundamental hold on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying visual curiosity through a direct and acknowledged act of display, rather than following a narrative enigma within a diagetic site into which the spectator peers invisibly," the hold anti-theatre has on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying their linguistic curiosity through foregrounding the structure, form, and rhythm of words, phrases, sentences and their relationship with one another (most often a jarring one, as in non sequiturs, puns, repetitions, etc.). (Gunning, 2004: 44)

This is not to say that in anti-theatre there is no narrative enigma or no dramatic action; rather, the drama no longer takes place on the level of character psychology but on the level of language itself. When we are following a typical narrative enigma (one driven by character psychology and, at the same time, driving character development) we ask "what happens next?" We make predictions about possible outcomes based on our knowledge of the characters and the story so far. But can we still talk of "events" when the drama takes place on the level of language? Is an event necessarily something that happens to a character and demands interpretation? An "event," in the common sense of the term, carries with it a certain understanding of temporality. An event presupposes a "before" and an "after," and an implicit distinction between objective and subjective, or real and unreal: there is always more than one possible interpretation of an event. However, when we are reading or watching anti-plays like those of Ionesco or Beckett, we cannot really say that we are waiting for something and this is precisely the paradox of a play like *Waiting for Godot*. What we are doing while we are reading Beckett's play is the very opposite of waiting: because we have no knowledge of the characters, we cannot predict what they will do next, or explain why they are doing whatever it is they are doing. What we are waiting for in *The Bald Soprano* is for a certain line of reasoning to unfold, not for characters to communicate something to one another. For instance, in the scene in which the Martins are trying to remember where they have seen each other, it is the momentum of language itself that drives the story forward rather than the motivation of the two characters. There is an entirely different temporality at play here: our attention is on the present (and thus on the 'material' of the play, i.e. its language); our attention span is foreshortened. Insofar as an interpretation of an event is the difference between the anticipation and the memory of the event, in an anti-play, which does not make this sort of distinction, events coincide with their interpretations. One cannot "interpret," in the common sense of the word, lines such as the following: "Potatoes are very good fried in fat; the salad oil was not rancid. The oil from the grocer at the corner is of better quality than the oil from the grocer across the street. It is even better than the oil from the grocer at the bottom of the street." (Ionesco, 1958: 9) There is nothing ambiguous about these lines. The anti-play achieves a level of specificity and transparency atypical of traditional drama: since everything is in the language, and language is on display, there are no hidden meanings or interpretations. And yet, there is something diffuse in this kind of signification. It is generally agreed, among film semioticians, that cinematic signifieds are far more diffuse or less articulated than literary ones. Statements in an anti-play are very specific, not revealing a deeper meaning, not withholding anything from us, but because of the lack of traditional cause and effect relations between them it is difficult to say what the play as a whole "means." Thus, despite the transparency and specificity of its language, the way in which an anti-play "means" is closer to cinematic than to literary signification. However, this sort of diffuseness is different from ambiguity: ambiguity implies the proliferation and destabilization of meanings whereas diffuseness implies the impossibility to phrase a meaning. The paradox of the anti-play lies in the fact that although it works through fairly discrete and recognizable units -- specific, self-evident statements -- it nevertheless produces the impression of something vague and abstract. Thus, if we were to summarize a play by Ionesco, we would be forced to make a very general and ultimately meaningless statement such as, for example, "*The Lesson* is about the impossibility of communication."

If it is true that an anti-play tends towards cinematic (rather than linguistic) signification, perhaps it is not so strange that what Ionesco calls anti-theatre bears a striking resemblance to Gunning's "cinema of attractions." Someone might object to approaching post-war theatre as a kind of a "reference" or "return" to the origins of a much younger art, cinema. However, a similar argument has been made by various film critics with respect to avant-garde films. For

instance, in "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes: A Dialectical Approach" Noël Burch lists some of the elements avant-garde films share with so called "primitive" (silent) cinema: the acentered image (no single portion of the image is privileged over others); the "artlessness" or "flatness" of the image due to the immobility of the camera and the minimal variation in the angle or distance from which subjects are shot; the merely "behavioral" (rather than psychological) presence of the people on screen; the nonclosure of films most of which were often looped during exhibition. (Burch, 1986: 486-488) Beckett's and Ionesco's anti-plays employ many of these "primitive" strategies, though in a self-conscious manner: acentered language (no single portion of a statement or no piece of dialogue is privileged over others, i.e. all statements have equal dramatic significance); acentered performance (no gesture is priviliged over others: the old dictum "the movements of the body express the movements of the soul" is absolutely foreign to anti-theatre which refuses to treat the body as a mere signifier of "internal" psychological development); indeterminate ending (reminiscent of the film loop); and, finally, interchangeable characters and/or a lack of character development -- the theatrical "equivalent" of the minimal variation in the angle and distance from which cinematic subjects are shot and of their purely behavioral presence.

The objectification of the human body in "primitive" cinema, especially in slapstick comedy (the human body treated as purely material rather than as an expression of a particular mental space), is structurally similar to the objectification of language in anti-theatre, which frequently treats words literally rather than as vehicles of some transcendental meaning or as expressions of a particular personality. Chaplin and Keaton often produce the effect of the absurd by attributing the same functions and/or personal expectations to a range of different objects and people: they treat everything and everyone as if they were the same, mixing and mismatching objects and their functions (e.g. Chaplin's *The Pawnshop* [1916]). Thus, both slapstick comedy and the anti-play rely on the continuous dissociation of objects (material objects, words, or bodies) from their functions (the uses specific to an object, the meaning specific to a word, the voice embodied in a particular body). However, while slapstick comedy performs such dissociations playfully, the anti-play refuses to "return" functions to their respective objects/words/bodies. In the work of Ionesco and Beckett the carnivalesque never fulfills its liberating promise the way it does in Chaplin's films and in Dada nonsense poetry. Although the carnivalesque and the grotesque have their place in anti-theatre (hence the importance of the Clown figure in Beckett's work), they remain trapped within an existentialist framework that obstructs the celebration of the absurd. Nonsense or flights of absurdity and ridiculousness in Dada poetry conceal a therapeutic purpose that is ultimately missing from anti-theatre.

While in Beckett's anti-plays there is a strong connection between the corporeal presence on the stage (in Essif's terms "an empty figure on an empty stage") and the empty mental space of characters (as opposed to realistic psychological portraits "stuffed" with clear character motivations), the corporeality of early cinema does not make this connection: it is simply interested in what must have, at least in the beginning, appeared as an almost magical process of the technical reproduction of three-dimensional bodies on a two-dimensional surface. The corporeality of silent cinema does not suggest the metaphysical and psychological emptiness that pervades nouveau theatre, but simply celebrates the realistic reproduction of bodies apart from any mental space that can be associated with them. The clownish characters of Chaplin and Keaton do not yet anticipate Beckett's hyperconscious marionette-character, the "übermarionette" whose essential characteristics include:

its relative immobility (instead of either dynamic acrobatics or 'normal' social or biological motion and gesture); its central… detached and highlighted presence on stage (instead of an interactive relationship with other characters); and consequently, its focus on the head as a metaphorical empty space (instead of the mimetic -- ideological or psychological -- focus on the whole body. (Essif, 2001: 184)

Joining forces with Tom Gunning and Noël Burch in challenging the traditional analysis of silent cinema as a "primitive" phase in the evolution of cinema, Thomas Elsaesser notes that what is striking about silent cinema, particularly the films of Lumière, "was neither the realism nor the magic of the images, but [their] extreme artificiality… their sophisticated mise-en-scene, the exactly calculated camera placements," in a word their highly stylized or theatrical aspect. (Elsaesser, 1998: 52) Two of the features of early Lumière films to which Elsaesser draws our attention are the use of depth and space and the distinction between off-screen and off-frame or between imaginary space and real space. (Elsaesser, 1998: 56) What appear to be simple films, for instance *The Arrival of the Mail Train* (1895), are in fact not plotless at all; their narrative emerges from the purely visual manipulation of space and depth of field. Similarly, even if it seems as though nothing happens in Beckett's or Ionesco's anti-plays, they are not undramatic. In *The Bald Soprano*, which consists of purely declarative statements (in fact, it's a kind of meta-dialogue: Mrs. Smith, for example, speaks in the first person singular but her speech sounds as first and third person singular *at the same time*; she, and all the other characters, always seem to be talking *about* what they are talking about, as if they were their own literary critics), the drama is precisely the falling apart of declarative speech, the impossibility of declarative statements to link to one another. The opaqueness of language is dramatized, paradoxically, through its reduction to its most basic, supposedly unproblematic use (the declarative one). Another feature of early films Elsaesser points to is what he calls "the structural principle" (exemplified in the film *Boat Leaving the Harbour* [1895]), which forces the viewer to distinguish between off-screen and off-frame. The opaqueness of language in Ionesco's plays has an analogous effect of making us aware of the distinction between language as a thing and language as a means of communication.

Another interesting parallel between early films and anti-plays is their circularity or nonclosure. Elsaesser explains circularity in early cinema by pointing to a specific socio-historical fact, namely the fact that Lumière's films were exhibited as part of a variety programme, i.e. they were supposed to be seen over and over again. (Elsaesser, 1998: 57) Many of Beckett's and Ionesco's plays also rely on repetition or looping: in *Waiting for Godot* the protagonists decide to move and then do not move, over and over again; the two sets of families in *The Bald Soprano* become interchangeable at the end of the play; the professor gets ready to kill, in the course of a lesson in philology, the next student in *The Lesson*. The nonclosure of such plays is anti-theatre's own way of approximating what André Bazin considers the basic principle of cinema, "the denial of any frontiers to action." (Bazin, 1967: 105) (Bazin is referring to the infinity of off-screen space, which he contrasts with the circumscribed space of the stage flanked by wings and thus foregrounding the machinery of illusion.) The plays' flagrant disregard for any kind of an ending or resolution, on the level of narrative, mimics the infinity of action that cinema achieves on the level of space. Thus, a feature of the cinematic medium itself (the ontology of the film image) becomes a theme in anti-theatre: as we cross from one art to another, a technique of representation transforms into an object of representation.

The continuity between silent cinema and theatre is the subject of Ben Brewster's and Lea Jacobs' recent book *Theatre to Cinema*, in which they argue that "much nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre was characterized by a situational and pictorial approach to narrative." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 212) The authors take up A. Nicholas Vardac's argument, in *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Origins of Early Film. From Garrick to Griffith*, that "a large part of nineteenth-century theatre was cinema manqué." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 6). Considering theatre as part of a larger cultural project which demands a greater realism in the arts, Vardac argues that the development of cinematic technologies has resolved the problems of achieving a realistic representation in theatre. Brewster and Jacobs (like Susan Sontag) challenge the idea that the history of cinema is one of a steady emancipation from theatrical models:

> Rather than seeing the theatre as striving to be cinematic [as Vardac did], to be what the cinema was, as it were, automatically, we believe that the cinema strove to be theatrical, or to assimilate a particular theatrical tradition, that of pictorialism." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 214)

They insist that both theatre and cinema demand spectacle as such, rather than realism: "'Spectacle' described a kind of staging that appealed primarily to the eye, and what appealed to the eye was conceived in terms of painting rather than photography." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 8) Challenging the dominant idea that the most essential part of theatre is the dramatic text (a view as old as Aristotle), the authors demonstrate the way in which the pictorial effect in theatre informed the evolution of silent cinema. Using the term "theatrical pictorialism" to describe a certain kind of address in which the spectator is not absorbed by the play or the film, they take issue with Diderot's idea of the absorbing tableau, and claim instead that nineteenth century theatre -- and later silent cinema "solicit attention…either apparently engaging the viewers (addressing them by look or gesture), or revealing the self-consciousness that suggests an awareness of the regard of an unacknowledged viewer." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 10) Insofar as Brewster's and Jacobs' purpose is to liberate this sort of "theatricality" -- what they call "the coup de théâtre" -- from its disparaging interpretation, in their discourse "tableau" or "picture" become associated with the anti-absorptive sense of the word that emerged in the eighteenth century. Not surprisingly, Gunning's notion of "a cinema of attractions" figures prominently in Brewster's and Jacobs' discussion of "theatrical pictorialism." The connection between anti-theatre and theatrical pictorialism might not be obvious. There are two ways in which such a connection can be established. First, like silent cinema, anti-theatre is anti-absorptive. Second, whereas in the case of silent cinema "theatrical display" refers literally to the visual aspect of cinema, to the foregrounding of the image (in the absence of editing techniques which will eventually push cinema in the direction of narrative), in anti-theatre the effect of "theatricality" is metaphorical. Language is foregrounded, rather than images, and yet the foregrounding of language has the effect of "flattening" it in such as way that it becomes "pictorial" in a metaphorical sense; it becomes opaque or decorative rather than expressive or dramatic.

Another term Brewster and Jacobs use to talk about theatre and early cinema, in conjunction with the notion of "tableau" or "picture," is "situation." Situations are not actions: "Situations exist on the cusp of actions; they give rise to actions and are in turn altered by them… To think of a story in terms of situations, as opposed to a series of obstacles, grants a certain autonomy to each discrete state of affairs." (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 23-24) Actions have a past (actions that led up to them) and a future (actions that will follow from them), while a situation is more episodic and thus more self-sufficient. Insofar as situation cannot be

subsumed under the laws of narrative, I would argue that in anti-theatre language follows a situational kind of logic: we are presented with a certain linguistic situation -- for example, repetition -- which then simply unfolds to its (ir)rational conclusion. This happens quite often in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, a play rich in "linguistic situations": analogy, inversion, deduction, induction, contradiction, etc. Ionesco is more interested in enumerating possible outcomes of various logical procedures (drawing an analogy, formulating a hypothesis based on inductive or deductive reasoning, etc.) than in characterization. By analogy with Brewster's and Jacobs' idea of "situation dramaturgy," Ionesco's plays provide us with an example of "linguistic dramaturgy": the drama originates not in the characters' minds but in the structure of the language they use. Characters are "individualized" through the particular kinds of linguistic situations assigned to them in what seems to be a random fashion. For example, if we sense a tension between Mr. and Mrs. Smith when they argue whether or not there is always someone, or never anyone, outside the door when the door bell rings (aha, we say to ourselves, here is a psychological -- marital -- problem), this is merely the tension inherent in any self-contradictory hypothesis produced through inductive reasoning. What appears to be a "conflict" between husband and wife has nothing to do with their personalities but results from the inevitable failure of language to represent, and thus account for, the messy, self-contradictory empirical evidence with which we are confronted every day.

In traditional theatre characters are endowed with a certain psychological make up, which becomes transparent through their performance on the stage (gestures, voice, etc.) and through the narrative their performance puts in motion. In anti-theatre language no longer expresses the inner life of characters and neither does it move forward a chain of causally related events. The excessive verbosity of anti-plays assigns language a pictorial function and locates the drama in the excessive banality of the situation. In *The Bald Soprano*, for instance, the drama originates in the banal (purely adjectival) situation with which we are presented in the stage directions for the first scene, which describe both the characters and the setting simply as "English." Insofar as a "situation" foreshortens time, it is similar to Lessing's notion of "the pregnant moment": it contains in itself the causes that led up to it and the possible consequences that will follow from it. (Brewster and Jacobs, 1997: 11) Like "tableau," with which it is closely related, a "situation" interrupts the narrative: it freezes time into an image that captures the significance (emotional, narrative, or allegorical) of the entire work. A "tableau" or a "situation" are characterized by flatness and self-sufficiency, as opposed to depth and transparency. Inasmuch as in a tableau everything is given, displayed, foregrounded, the tableau is anti-absorbing: by drawing attention to itself, it addresses the spectator in such a way as to make him self-conscious of his own act of looking (conversely, any sort of narrative development absorbs the spectator: editing distracts our attention from the individual shots, from their pictorial nature, directing it instead to the relation between them).

In the anti-plays of Ionesco and Beckett, then, language becomes pictorial or tableau-esque. One might object that a tableau freezes time whereas many of these plays rely on the trope of repetition, which seems to be temporal in nature. In fact, repetition is the perfect example of the freezing of language, analogous to the freezing of narrative action in a tableau. Take the exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Smith in *The Bald Soprano*, for instance. Following a long series of coincidences, recounted in exhaustive and exhausting detail and in an intentionally annoying repetitive pattern (the same sentence structure, even the same sentences are repeated: "How curious! How bizarre! What a coincidence!") the two come to the logical conclusion that they are married. If we have been attentive enough, we realize early on that they are married, so that the rest of the exchange adds nothing to what we already suspect. As

a result, the words the Smiths keep repeating become opaque, no longer transmitting information or pushing the action forward, but simply foregrounding more and more the absurdity of the situation. The characters realize that they are married only because of the force of logic (which is to say language), i.e. they are married only if (and insofar as) their marriage can be logically deduced rather than lived. Reading or hearing their exchange does not provide us with a sense of discovery (either that they are gradually discovering their identities or that we are gradually discovering their identities) but rather with a sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy: given the logical connections between successive statements, it is inevitable that the two characters will turn out to be married. The correct grammatical structure of sentences outweighs in importance the meaning of what is being said. Thus, Mrs. Smith talks, in the same breath, of her children and the food she had for dinner ("Helen is like me: she's a good manager, thrifty, plays the piano. She never asks to drink English beer. She's like our little daughter who drinks only milk and eats only porridge…She's named Peggy. The quince and bean pie was marvelous"), mixes words of different semantic registers in a grammatically correct way ("Yogurt is excellent for the stomach, the kidneys, the appendicitis, and apotheosis" -- the place of a word in a sentence is more important than the word itself: apotheosis is a noun, like appendicitis), and reasons in a circle (when her husband asks why Parker died whereas his doctor lived, she answers "Because the operation was successful in the doctor's case and it was not in Parker's," the implication being that as long as a statement is formulated as an answer --"Because…" -- it is an answer, even if doesn't answer the question at all). (Ionesco, 1958: 10) Throughout the play the validity and significance of what is said is determined by the vague appearance of logic, which rests on the grammatical correctness of statements. When a character is asked to draw a conclusion from a set of facts, what matters is that his/her ideas take the believable form of a conclusion ("All doctors are quacks. And all patients too. Only the Royal Navy is honest in England"); the content of the conclusion itself is unimportant. Similarly, when Mr. Smith draws an analogy between the doctor's relationship to his patients and the captain's relationship to his ship, one need only announce that one is drawing an analogy in order to accept the conclusion, however false, based on the analogy.

A situation is complete from the very beginning. Consider the opening of *The Bald Soprano*:

> There, it's nine o'clock. We've drunk the soup, and eaten the fish and chips,
> and the English salad. The children have drunk English water. We've eaten
> well this evening. That's because we live in the suburbs of London and
> because our name is Smith." (Ionesco, 1958: 9).

Although these lines of dialogue make reference to several "events" (the family members have had dinner: a specific list of unspecific food items is provided as "evidence") these events are not 'actions' in the traditional sense of the term. The attribution of the same adjective -- "English" -- to all of them renders the events representative of a whole lifestyle rather than being specific events that have taken place on a particular day. A situation can be summarized: there are dictionaries listing possible situations. The situation with which *The Bald Soprano* opens can be summarized as "middle class life in the English suburbs." Not only are the characters themselves merely representative of a particular social class, rather than individuals, but (and here lies the absurdity) they are aware of their own abstract, representative nature ("That's because we live in the suburbs of London and because our name is Smith"). Thus, the situation, like the tableau on the level of language, also works on the principle of foregrounding. In the example above, the description of the scene includes its own interpretation (in fact, the author's interpretation, which he presents as the characters'

own self-awareness). A "situation," unlike an "action," is self-reflexive precisely on account of its generality.

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Between 1998 and 2001, a team of nineteen filmmakers were involved in the project *Beckett on Film*, whose ambitious purpose was to put Beckett's nineteen plays on film. Fortunately, none of the films suffer from what André Bazin disapprovingly calls "the urge 'to make cinema'." (Bazin, 1967: 86) The filmmakers involved in the project do not pretend to be making movies; they do not ask us to forget the conventions of theatre. Here it is useful to recall Bazin's comment on Laurence Olivier's film adaptation of *Henry V*: "We are not in the play, we are in an historical film about the Elizabethan theatre… Our enjoyment of the play however is not of the kind we would get from an historical documentary." (Bazin, 1967: 88) Similarly, *Beckett on Film* makes us feel as though we were watching a film about Beckett's theatre. Cinema is used to foreground, rather than hide, theatrical conventions, the result of which is, as Bazin says of Jean Cocteau's films, that "[o]ne is no longer adapting a subject. One is staging a play by means of cinema." (Bazin, 1967: 93). These film adaptations are premised on the understanding that Beckett's stage directions are part of the text itself, that the text is already performative. Beckett's plays are synthetic: intonation, gesture, rhythm, speed of delivery, light, shadow, projection of voice, movement are all integrally connected: slightly altering one shifts the overall effect of the play. In this respect, Beckett as a playwright comes very close to the film auteur.

One of the arguments put forward by the critics of the *Beckett on Film* project is that the film director imposes his or her own interpretation of the play by merely choosing one particular kind of shot over another, one particular angle over another, etc. The filmmaker can crop the image of the actor whichever way he or she wants so that what the film viewer gets is a reinterpretation of the play rather than the play itself. Interestingly, all examples the critic gives in support of his argument have something to do with the representation of the human body on screen. Supposedly, the film version of a play is more subjective than its stage production and a large part of this difference is due to the filmmaker's greater freedom to manipulate the actors' bodies. The implication is that since an actor's body is always in full view on stage, a common ground is established between the points of views of all theatre goers: even if they see the body from different perspectives, depending on where they are sitting, they still see the same body in its entirety. This least common denominator supposedly grants a certain fundamental objectivity to the representation and its reception. Starting from an erroneous assumption -- that the way in which a body behaves on stage is not a matter of directorial choice but something "given" -- this criticism suggests that cinema is intrinsically more subjective than theatre. This line of reasoning suffers from the same faults that undermine the Bazinian notion of cinema as having a purely indexical relationship to reality: the idea that the human body on stage does not differ from the human body off stage, that it is an objectively existing thing rather than a representation, is not, in the end, very different from the idea that the film image is an "imprint" of reality rather than a representation.

The intriguing thing about the argument put forward by the detractors of the project *Beckett on Film* is that it reverses the relationship between cinema and theatre: contrary to the popular belief that cinema is less "theatrical" than theatre, it suggests that theatre is more realistic than cinema, that cinema is more "theatrical" than theatre because on top of the supposedly "raw" material with which theatre works, cinema adds a second level of

articulation or signification, that of film techniques. This implies that while there can be a semiotics of cinema, there cannot be a semiotics of theatre (or at least that the semiotics of theatre is "borrowed" from the semiotics of the written text from which the stage production, supposedly, never strays) simply because theatre "deals" with real human bodies and bodies, supposedly, cannot function as signs. Leaving aside the fact that a stage production of a play is as far removed from the text of the play as the film adaptation is removed from the stage production, I want to argue not only that a semiotics of the theatre is possible but, more specifically, that the aesthetic of anti-theatre (the theatre of Ionesco and Beckett) recalls the aesthetic of silent cinema, although there is also an important distinction to be made between the two art forms: the pictorial nature of silent cinema is a sort of display that provokes in the viewer a sense of pleasure and control over the representation, whereas the pictorial nature of anti-theatre underscores the opacity of the representation and the frustration we feel in trying to penetrate it. In other words, a distinction needs to be made between the naïvely pictorial and the self-reflexively pictorial.

How do we explain the similarities between *silent* cinema, on one hand, and the *garrulous* plays of an author like Beckett? Are the film adaptations of Beckett's plays merely silent films with added sound or is there something of the aesthetic of silent cinema in the plays themselves? The plays share with silent cinema a preoccupation with the very material of each respective art form: images in silent cinema, language in Beckett's plays. Thus, despite the verbal nature of Beckett's work, language in his plays achieves a pictorial effect not unlike that produced by the foregrounding of the visible (rather than the signifying) aspect in silent cinema. Beckett's verbal excess borders on a kind of muteness, perhaps an effect of the typically Beckettian approach to drama and performance, which, as Enoch Brater argues, are never separated in Beckett's work: "'Text'…at least as Beckett has been redefining it since *Not I*, collapses our traditional way of thinking about drama as something separate and distinct from performance." (Brater, 1987: 4) As long as what is said (drama) remains separate from the act of saying it (performance) we are still in the domain of signification. It is only when speech and its delivery become one that language becomes "mute": it is mute precisely because it says everything, including the fact that it is saying it.

The film adaptations of Beckett's plays are reminiscent of silent cinema in the faithfulness with which they avoid intricate camera movements or, as some of them do, any sort of camera movement at all. It is generally agreed that what separates film from theatre is the mobility of the point of view in film, a mobility that filmmakers, however, did not immediately explore: for the first decade in the development of cinema, the camera remained stationary, recreating the fixed point of view of the theatre viewer. The film adaptations of Beckett's plays do not attempt to dynamize or mobilize the spectator's point of view (panning or traveling shots are almost entirely absent). The camera does not explore the film space but remains distanced from it, underscoring further the pictorial effect of the film image. And this makes perfect sense when one considers what the plays are trying to represent: by intentionally immobilizing the film viewer's point of view and ignoring the wide range of tools available to the filmmaker to achieve a peripatetic point of view, the films facilitate our identification with the intellectually, emotionally and physically immobilized characters of Beckett's plays. Of course, one would argue that the stage productions of these plays achieve the same effect much more easily since the point of view of the theatre viewer is naturally immobilized. And this is precisely the point: in theatre the spectator's immobilized viewpoint is taken for granted, but when it is employed in cinema, an art that works precisely through the opposite means of mobilizing the spectator's viewpoint, it draws attention to itself and heightens our identification with the characters.

The artlessness of silent cinema Noël Burch analyzes in his article on avant-garde cinema is readily observable in the film adaptation of Beckett's *Happy Days*, for example. Throughout the film -- the film consists of a long monologue, which the protagonist delivers half-buried in the sand in the middle of the desert with nothing else in sight but her bag, an umbrella, and a gun -- there are absolutely no camera movements. We cut from extreme long shots of the protagonist buried in the sand, to medium shots and, toward the end of the film, to extreme close ups of her face. The image remains intentionally flat -- the foreground and the background are always in perfect focus. The only cutting takes place between shots of different distances or different angles but there is no expressive cutting, for example cutting on a certain sentence or word to underscore its significance. Thus there is nothing to guide the viewer, to tell him where to look or when to pay more attention. Just as in silent cinema images are non-centered -- no portion of an image is more significant than another -- so in this film adaptation of Beckett's play, no cut (be it from a long shot to a medium shot, or from a low angle to a higher angle) is more significant than another. The lack of expressiveness in cutting is matched by a similar lack of expressiveness or suggestiveness in the manipulation of image and sound. As we cut from a longer shot to a medium one and then go back to a longer shot, the protagonist's monologue continues: it becomes separated from the character and sounds as distant from her as it is from us. Since the voice continues to be heard even when the protagonist is barely visible in the distance (in a very long shot), it loses its expressiveness and begins to sound like a voiceover. This de-linking of sound and image is reminiscent of the use of captions in silent cinema.

Even though *Happy Days* is a long monologue, and in this sense an instance of verbosity rather than muteness, it resembles silent cinema in terms of acting style. In silent cinema, the actor uses his or her whole body (in a sense the body in silent cinema fulfills the function of the voice in sound cinema). In *Happy Days*, there are no 'events' in the traditional sense of the word: the events happen only on the level of language and are thus registered only as imperceptible shifts in the protagonist's facial expression, in the intonation of her voice, in the rhythm of her delivery. Thus, while in silent cinema the entire body of the actor compensates for the lack of sound, in the film adaptation of Beckett's play the face of the protagonist compensates for the lack of narrative action in the traditional sense of the word. Similarly, in Ionesco's plays drama is rhetorical rather than psychological: *The Bald Soprano* escalates into a cacophony of meaningless dialogue while *The Chairs* ends in muteness.

Anthony Minghella's adaptation of Beckett's play entitled *Play* (a sort of love triangle melodrama consisting of three characters' monologues carefully edited together) opens with an overtly self-referential gesture that mimics the meta-theatre or anti-theatre aspect of Beckett's own play: the film opens with a long film leader, cut and scratched here and there, until we get to the first shot, an omniscient crane shot of a field of enormous urns in which are trapped men and women incessantly talking, whispering, or yelling their banal story of marital infidelity. Again mimicking the act of foregrounding that is constitutive of Beckett's meta-theatre (the play is called *Play*), the film keeps foregrounding its own status as a film by interrupting itself to insert another long piece of film leader and by foregrounding the sound of the film equipment used in the shooting of the film (the monologues of the three characters are accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of cameras clicking and/or zooming). The same act of foregrounding takes place in *Acts Without Words I*. "Action" in this film take place literally on a film roll which we watch unroll across the screen (with the equally literal soundtrack of a film projector) in the beginning of the film. Three film frames spread across the screen and two characters take turns moving, literally, from one film frame to the next, even as their literal, foregrounded movement reminds us of the same movement of film shots

that we do not notice but thanks to which we are able to watch the film within the film. The film within the film mimics the aesthetic of early silent film: faded colors, spasmodic and mechanical physical movements, repetitive soundtrack.

Another way in which Beckett's plays, and their film adaptations, return to silent cinema than to theatre has to do with the role of the actor. According to Bazin, "in the theater the drama proceeds from the actor, in the cinema it goes from the décor to man." (Bazin, 1967: 102) This distinction does not apply to Ionesco's and Beckett's anti-plays, in which character psychology plays such a minor role, or no role at all, and characters become as important - or rather as unimportant - as the *mise-en-scène*. This becomes particularly evident in plays that underscore the characters' literal (and metaphorical) immobility. Characters are presented as trapped, either in certain linguistic structures (such as the structure of repetition in *The Bald Soprano*) or literally trapped (as the protagonist in *Happy Days*, buried half-way in the sand, or the characters in *Play*, trapped in ancient urns). The décor in these plays no longer fulfills a secondary, decorative function: it functions both as the immediate setting for the unfolding action and, at the same time, as a sort of character in its own right. The relegation of the actor to a secondary role is taken to the extreme in the film version of *Not I*, where we see the actress (Julianne Moore) only for a second, the rest of the film consisting of a series of close ups of her mouth. In a way Beckett's plays disprove Bazin's argument that the human, which he identifies with the verbal, play a central role in theatre and a secondary one in cinema. Discussing Racine, Shakespeare and Molière, Bazin notes that "[w]hat is specifically theatrical about these tragedies is not their action so much as the human, that is to say the verbal, priority given to their dramatic structure." (Bazin, 1967: 106) While it is correct to emphasize the verbal priority given to the dramatic structure of Beckett's plays, the verbal is by no means equivalent to the human. The verbosity of Beckett's characters does not have the effect of producing highly individual human beings who want to express themselves. In fact, the more a character speaks -- even about himself or herself -- the less we know about them (thus, many of Beckett's characters are interchangeable). We focus on the cadences of their speech, on its rhetorical features, and we know next to nothing about their motivation, or their individual past. We are interested in the speech, not in who is speaking. This is why privileging the verbal is not necessarily privileging the human. The more performative drama becomes (and in Beckett's case drama and performance are one), the less it is concerned with individual psychology. In this sense, performance (and performative speech) is pictorial: it does not aim at revealing the interior life of characters.

When asked how the film versions of Beckett's plays differ from the stage productions, most actors and directors involved in the project *Beckett of Film* underscore the differences in terms of acting: whereas on stage actors are expected to project their voices in order to be heard, on the screen, a more "intimate" medium, their performance is toned down, sounding more "naturalistic." For example, the female protagonist of *Happy Days* does not project her voice but rather chatters to herself. A common thread running through the actors' and directors' comments is a general agreement that a film version of a Beckett play is more intense, more dynamic, more intimate than a stage version. Interestingly, the intensity in question is that of the human voice. For example, Neil Jordan points out that a stage production of a play like *Not I*, which is concerned with speech, cannot produce the same intensity as the film simply because a mouth on the stage would be too small and inaudible, whereas the film can isolate the mouth in an extreme close up. In the film *Not I* the dramatic action of the play unfolds through abrupt cuts between a series of close ups of the mouth, shot from different angles, the subtle contortions of facial muscles, the movements of the lips, the rhythm of the mouth opening and closing. Insofar as we can make the generalization that

Beckett's plays are about language, the film *Not I* captures what is most essentially theatrical about Beckett's play better than the stage production. On stage the foregrounding of language as a thing rather than as a means of expression and communication can be achieved only indirectly, for example through intentionally minimizing the role of other elements such as the set design or the actors' physical movement. Minimal physical movement and a minimal set force the viewer to focus on the verbal exchange between characters (of course one could argue the other way around as well: it is because characters talk interminably that everything else sinks into the background). The close up in cinema, however, allows this interminable chatter to be presented directly, with a greater intensity.

This is the case not only in *Not I*, but also in other monologues such as *Rockeby* (which consists of a steady, rhythmical cutting back and forth between a close up and a medium shot of the heroine, and between a frontal and side shot of her, the rhythm of the cutting mirroring the rhythm of the rocking chair); *Ohio Impromptu* (in which the camera starts outside the room and gradually waltzes closer and closer around the character(s)); *Play* (which works through spasmodic cuts between close ups of the three characters); and *Happy Days* (which begins with an extreme long shot and ends with an extreme close up of the heroine's face, the drama unfolding not only through the heroine's speech but also through the variation in the length of the shots). In the documentary included in the first volume of the project, Alan Rickman, who plays "M" in *Play*, observes that Beckett's instructions for the way in which M's lines are meant to be delivered -- "in an ash and abstract voice" -- would be impossible to follow on stage but are easily realized on the screen thanks to the close up, which renders the actors' voices more audible, more expressive or intimate.

One of the directors working on the project summarizes Beckett's minimalist method in the following way: if Beckett has to tell a story about a man who falls in love with a woman but things don't work out and he makes a fool of himself, he would strip the story of all circumstantial details, get it down to the bare necessities, probably ending up with a stage direction such as "the character takes three steps forward and shrieks." Beckett's intention is to condense or compress the dramatic action, which raises the question: What is the minimal requirement for a play, that which cannot be bracketed out, to use a phenomenological term, after everything else has been bracketed out? I would say for Beckett it is the human voice. The physical entrapment of many of his characters liberates the voice and immediately locates the drama in the characters' speech, more specifically in the characters' monologues. The monologue is certainly one of Beckett's preferred forms. But what is a monologue? It is an intimate conversation one has with oneself, a kind of thinking aloud that we are engaged in all the time, sometimes unconsciously and sometimes not. Here an important distinction needs to be made. Too often Beckett's plays are referred to as "wordy." However, the interminability of speech, the barrage of words that washes over us when we read a Beckett play, is simply the normal, everyday monologue that runs through our heads, most of the time silently and not very coherently. There is nothing "wordy," "rhetorical" or "theatrical" about it. That it appears to be wordy and rhetorical is due to the specific nature of the stage, on which actors are supposed to project their voices, pause between lines, exaggerate their intonation, etc. From this point of view, the film medium seems better suited than theatre at presenting the spontaneous chatter that fills our minds.

Beckett has been alternatively "claimed for" both modernism and postmodernism, with critics like Richard Sheppard proposing a middle path by arguing that postmodernism has inherited its problematics both from the avant-garde wing of modernism and from high modernists like Joyce, Eliot, Conrad, Proust, Le Corbusier, and Picasso. (Sheppard, 2000: 356-357) Even if

Beckett's plays could still be seen as anti-art, their film adaptations participate in the postmodern practice of appropriation rather than in a modernist oppositional practice. On one hand, paradoxically, it is precisely because they are so faithful to their literary and dramatic source, because they patently refuse to translate the theatrical into the cinematic, because they refuse to "make cinema," that these film adaptations participate in the art of appropriation: they cleverly appropriate Beckett for the film audience of the twenty-first century, an audience well-educated in ideas of theatricality, stylization, Brechtian distanciation, unsuturing the spectator, foregrounding the film apparatus, etc. And yet, there is something anachronistic or un-postmodernist about this very insistence on respecting the autonomy of the two arts (theatre and cinema), this refreshing lack of interest in producing yet another postmodern pastiche of dramatic and film techniques.

**Appendix**

"Word" and "image" are functions rather than "things": a word can function as either "word" (e.g., speech or on-screen writing) or "image" (e.g. when a film image draws attention to the embodied nature of words i.e., to their manner of delivery); analogously, an image can function as either "image" or "word" (e.g., a cliché image is the visual equivalent of a tautology). Neither reading (words) not seeing (images) are direct, simultaneous processes simply because human thought or consciousness is not simultaneous with itself. Throwing "word" into the dungeon of signification/interpretation, and relegating "image" to some idyllic point (in time?) preceding the "decline" into signification, is a common misconception that oversimplifies both word and image by alternatively placing one before, and above, the other: on one side, "In the beginning was the Word"; the entire history of logocentrism, whose critique has been the central preoccupation of Derrida; or Baudrillard's critique of the de-realization of the world into simulacra; on the other side, the corruption of "pure" (silent) cinema by "the talkie"; the return to the "cinema of attractions" through the hyperreal sublimity of digital special effects.

The *image* is often conceived in terms of its *immediacy* (it is perceived directly), its *materiality* or *opacity* (a consequence of its immediacy), and its *spatial* (framing, composition) rather than temporal determination. None of these characteristics, however, are essential to the image. First, the perception of an image (perception in general) is never pure but always informed by memory: Bergson, for instance, has demonstrated this in *Matter and Memory*; we can also add here Sartre's analysis of the act of reading (when we read a sentence, we do not read every single word but fill in the blanks drawing on our memory and imagination), and Alexander Luria's experiments, discussed in his book *A Little Book about a Vast Memory*, with an anonymous subject, S., for whom memory was purely a matter of perception (he could remember anything, including extremely long strings of words and numbers, as long as he could visualize them, i.e. imagine perceiving them). The immediacy and directness of an image is, therefore, deceptive. A negative proof of that is a recent finding at the Salk Institute (in La Jolla, California), which revealed that the human brain lags behind pure visual awareness by eighty milliseconds, a little longer than the blink of an eye, demonstrating that what we normally think of as "perception" is always already a memory. Second, an image can be both "material" (e.g., film images that are said to "arrest" the narrative in a film, without signifying anything but themselves) and "immaterial" (e.g., in Baudrillard's discourse of postmodern culture as obscenely immaterial images signify the end

of visibility: they are on the side of abstraction, immateriality). Third, certain film images are "pregnant" with time rather than spatially determined (e.g., Deleuze's "time-images").

On the other hand, the *word* is frequently conceived in terms of its *mediated* nature (as opposed to the alleged immediacy of the image), its *immateriality* (it is assumed to incarnate an essence that always escapes it), its *temporal* rather than spatial determination (words happen in time: for example, to understand a sentence, one needs to retain in memory the words of which it is made; linguistic understanding is predicated on the "embalmment" of words into visual memory-images of words as graphic signs and semantic memory-images of their meaning). Again, none of these attributes are constitutive of words. First, words are not always mediated (pointing to something else beyond them) and immaterial (invisible under the burden of that ineffable thing they represent): the best example here is language poetry, which renders words imagistic and opaque (they are broken down into, and foregrounded as, phonemes, morphemes, vowels, syllables, consonants). Second, it is assumed that narrative is essential to the verbal arts and that, since time is essential to narrative, words must have a stronger temporal than spatial determination. This is clearly not the case in many twentieth-century art forms, for example anti-literature and anti-theatre. In metaphysical detective fiction (Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov, Calvino, Eco, Auster) time is essential to the narrative insofar as it destroys it and replaces it with circularity, repetition, and a whole range of doubling or mirror effects. In fact, one of the most interesting ways in which metaphysical detective fiction challenges classical detective fiction is by exposing the essential impasse of a hermeneutics founded on a traditional concept of time and substituting for it "a hermeneutics of spatial detection," where "architectural and geometrical imagery gives rise to an excessive determination of exterior space." (Botta, 1999: 224-225)

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