

# Not Only to Be Read: Aural and Visual Aspects of Samuel Beckett's *III Seen III Said*

Galina Kiryushina

Charles University, Prague

## Abstract

*This paper offers an examination of aural and visual features of Samuel Beckett's novel *III Seen III Said*. The main focus is on the methods by which these features appear within a prose text, and on their role as stimuli for a perception-driven approach to narrative construction. The motif of voice is established as crucial for Beckett's work, and oral expression is discussed in terms of its characteristic properties. The text's visual quality is approached from a cinematic perspective and investigated in parallel to Eisensteinian montage. The interaction between the two types of perception is considered in relation to Iser's reader-response criticism.*

*Keywords: voice, reader-response theory, montage, cinematography, perception*

This article is a result of a 2012 project supported by the Internal Grant Scheme of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

Almost the whole body of Samuel Beckett's work possesses a rather curious and distinguishable feature: his dramatic pieces, prose writing and poetry all seem to share certain endlessly recycled and reshaped motifs and formal characteristics. It has been argued, chiefly in relation to poetry and music, that the works of Beckett frequently exceed the boundaries of their genre by readily adopting qualities of other means of expression. In Beckett, prose and dramatic dialogue become increasingly melodic and elliptical as they take on the characteristics of poetry; music is assigned a "speaking" role in radio drama; the stage in theatrical works is often left dim and bare, with nearly all action being evoked verbally by voices resonating on- and off-stage.

The remarkable audio-visual qualities of *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) in particular owe much not only to Beckett's familiarity with various media, but also to his experimentation with the limits of language and the possibilities of the human voice. On their progressive path towards minimalism, Beckett's late texts address common themes of expression and perception from a challenging new perspective. In this sense, *Ill Seen Ill Said* attempts to explore two essential, and most Beckettian, types of perception – the aural and the visual. However dissimilar and seemingly dissociated from one another the two types may appear, the novel shows them coexisting in a peculiar symbiosis; their incessant interaction creates an incredibly dynamic perceptual experience for the reader. To borrow a quotation from Beckett himself, however anachronistically, *Ill Seen Ill Said* indeed seems to be a text "[...] not to be read – or rather, [...] not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to" (Beckett, *Disjecta* 27). Although the novel itself is unquestionably different in its nature from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which the young Beckett attempts to defend in his ambitious 1929 essay "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce," this observation predicts a direction in which his own writerly aesthetics would develop almost half a century later.

The spare, minimalistic language of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is quite possibly that of a speaking voice/director/editor – in short an authorial authority whose condensed vocal evocation of a memory fragment transforms itself into the film-like visuality of the early twentieth century montage cinema. Linguistic economy and the careful arrangement of words in the text work directly with the reader's perceptive and cognitive processes, producing maximum audio-visual effect with minimum words utilized. In the inter-permeability of the aural and the visual, the creator and the created, the narrator's evocation and the reader's perception of this evocation, Beckett's novel aspires to reproduce the complexity of a multi-perceptual representation. The text urges its readers to mis-perceive with a new subjectivity the objects already once subjectively mis-perceived; to "see" the "ill seen" while trying to grasp the "ill said".

As a considerable number of Beckett's other works, *Ill Seen Ill Said* is literally called into existence by the highly melodious voice of a disembodied, self-reflective narrator. One of Beckett's fondest "obsessions",<sup>1</sup> the voice commonly finds itself caught in a wordy loop of the creator– created polarity, a reciprocal interplay between the narrators and their linguistically conjured inventions. Here, the voice encourages itself and its perceivers to visualize a series of moving images "in order to resume" (51). It needs to make itself perceived in order to exist, if only as a voice echoed in the reader's "madhouse of the skull and nowhere else" (53). Accordingly, the nameless woman inhabiting the landscape of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is an "object of narrator's creation, the narrator himself often a creation, 'devised' [...] to someone else's imaginings" (Gontarski ix). Both the narrator's and the woman's "being" becomes equated with their "being perceived": the voice conjures up visual imagery which is thus presented to the "gazing" other, the reader.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Beckett's narrator is aware of the total and deadly interdependence of the creator and the created, reporting that "[the woman] shows herself only to her own. But she has no own. Yes yes she has one. And who has her" (49). He insinuates his control over the woman as she is clearly nothing more than a product of his imagining mind. This cyclical interaction between the "seen", the "said", and the related "heard" is further affirmed by the voice's proclamation that "she needs nothing. Nothing utterable. Whereas the other" (51). The

woman only needs to materialize before the narrator's inner eye, whereas the narrator's own existence can only be secured by his voicing of these imaginings.

The voice, in S. E. Gontarski's words "Beckett's [first] major fictional innovation" (viii), is a dominant narrative principle which should not be entirely identified with written language as it is distinctly constructed "not *only* to be read". The author himself once affirmed that his writing had always been composed for a voice, and, as Ludovic Janvier also points out, Beckett's texts are based on the voice's vocal quality and a physical rhythm that he had found in it.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting Beckett's intention to bring the formal structure closer to the text's content, the voice's momentariness, dynamic nature, performativity and subjectivity are the qualities that most eminently contribute to such an approximation.

The transience of oral expression accounts especially for the text's dynamics, since its content is constantly changing and thus endlessly escaping characterization. Also in *Ill Seen Ill Said* the uttered word can be said to exist only temporarily at the moment of its articulation; once silenced by another word or a pause, its significance becomes lost and its meaning untraceable in time. Consequently, in order to exist, the voice needs to go on narrating; the performative quality of language enables the articulated objects to come to life, while it naturally serves as a means of justification of the narrator's own existence. The formal construction of the novel likewise reflects and emphasizes the oral quality of the narrative. The voice repeatedly comes back to its previous utterances, negating, readjusting, clarifying and reshaping them with added information or self-addressed semi-rhetorical questions that contribute to the overall impression of the narrative's being carried out *viva voce*: "Resume the – what is the word? What the wrong word?" (51). Not only does the narrator consistently omit words and phrases, but his subjective testimony also lacks punctuation which would indicate and determine the internal structure of the individual sentences. This allows for the desired ambiguity of interpretation and powerfully solicits engagement and active cognitive response from the reader/listener. The sense of ephemerality pertaining to spoken language is further associated with the fleetingness of the narrator's own existence, yet again relating the notion of content to its form and reinforcing the creator-created codependence.

Furthermore, the utilization of voice provides space for disembodied narrators freed from the specificities of name, time, and space, thus ensuring their ultimate subjectivity. On the one hand, it generates constant uncertainty on the part of the audience, and on the other an incessant need to overcome this uncertainty by attempting to arrive at a logical conclusion. In this way, the subjectivity of the narrative becomes analogous in its scope to the reader's own subjectivity; the voice's elliptical dictate becomes almost entirely dependent on his or her ability to reassemble, fill and refill the gaps produced by the narrating authority. Such an active, dialogic nature of the interaction between the reader and the text has been emphasized and further discussed in reader-response criticism. Notably, as Wolfgang Iser points out in *The Implied Reader*, the dynamic reciprocity between the constituent parts of a literary work and the reader's creative imagination triggered and "set in motion" by such a process becomes essential for the work's aesthetic effect (277). The reader is constantly urged to search for a total, comprehensible meaning within a literary text, particularly when encountered with the gaps of what remains "unwritten" among the fixed points of authorial guidance (275). The role of the voice as a narrator in Beckett's work is primarily to *activate*, and its subjectivity serves as an ironic point of departure

precisely because it constantly tests the reader's reliance on this guidance. On that account, Beckett presupposes the reader's familiarity with the characteristics of spoken language to ensure that the voice of his novel is indeed "perceived" as a voice. The narrator's existence-as-perception therefore accentuates the fact that both himself and his creations are in their entirety a product of the reader's own imagination. According to John Dewey, "to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience" (Iser 288), and so the novel's prescribed auditory effects have to be reproduced aurally at least inside the reader's head, for indeed "the text only takes on life when it is realized" (Iser 274).<sup>4</sup>

The counterpart of the spoken word in Beckett is the visuality of motion, and *Ill Seen Ill Said* in particular is composed of images that are moving, in both its literal and figurative sense. The narrative voice – or, rather, the voice narrating – often employs techniques and imagery reminiscent of monochrome silent films of the 1920s, Beckett's admiration of which is reflected in many of his works for media and, perhaps most notably, in *Film*. The narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* refers both directly and unobtrusively to cinematographic practices and utilizes various cinematic effects to project the fragmented story onto the screen of the reader's mind. His account exhibits similarities with a film in the process of its (re) making, and the voice itself adopts characteristics of a director/editor who both controls and is controlled by the peculiar "motion picture".

As in a number of other works, action and speech remain separated, an important notion that Beckett tended to emphasize throughout his artistic output regardless of the medium employed. Nonetheless, the two types of perception – vocality and filmic visuality – are also in synthesis here: the interaction of their common qualities is vital for the text's audio-visual appeal. Both the characteristics of voice as discussed above and the individual "shots" juxtaposed and superimposed in an imaginary "montage" correspond to Iser's theory of narrative gaps. In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the narrator is heard reciting his lines into being and, consequently, leaves the reader to extract meaning from the endlessly readjusted and rearranged sequences of contrasting "film shots". The significance of employing "voice-over narrators" in Beckett's plays for television is accentuated in Jonathan Bignell's recent book *Beckett on Screen*: Bignell points out the narrators' authority as mediators between the spectators and the setting of the plays, which "reinforces the possibility that the represented environment is in some sense a creation or an illusion" (90). The fact that the voice-over naturally remains perceived separately from the images projected on screen adds profoundly to the overall sense of extreme subjectivity produced by the narrative. With every word ill-chosen, the images constituting "this still shadowy album" (Beckett, *Ill Seen* 50) become alternately clearer and obscured again as the narrator "flips" through its pages. Such a process is thus essentially dynamic and requires the reader's active and cautious involvement in every instance of the text's fragmented unfolding, which at the same time endorses and frustrates expectations.

As James Knowlson notes in his biography of Beckett, the author had always shown profuse interest in film and, during his formative years as an artist and critic, he studied in depth the theoretical writings of Soviet and German cinematographers including Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and Rudolf Arnheim (226). Elsewhere, Knowlson points out Beckett's ardent interest in theories of film form and "especially in montage or 'constructive editing', that was to make an important contribution to his future career [...] as a playwright and director" (Knowlson and Haynes 119). Beckett would display great enthusiasm

especially for theories of editing and Pudovkin's "discussions of 'rhythmic composition'" (Knowlson and Haynes 119). However, he would not concur, Knowlson also notes, with Pudovkin's "emphasis on realism in both stage and film acting [...], as well as [with] its didactic, propagandist perspective" (119). It may be also assumed, from Beckett's unwillingness to submit to the idea of an uninterrupted and objectively "realistic" plot, that he would reject the filmmaker's insistence on the "essential" narrative continuity and "that unity, which conditions the value of any work of art" (Pudovkin 32). Rather, the philosophical and aesthetic affiliation with Sergein Eisenstein's films and theories of montage based chiefly on the notion of conflict and opposition become strongly felt in Beckett's work decades later: very much like the matters of poetry and voice, they find their way not only into his television scripts and his one short film, but also into his multifaceted prose.

Eisenstein's view on the poetics of montage is perhaps most adequately characterized by the juxtaposition of two contrastive images that would, in their dynamic clash, eventually give rise to a synthesized image of an unforeseen "third something", a concept shaped into its wholeness by the viewer's cognitive processes (*Film Sense* 10). In Eisensteinian terms, "[...] to achieve its result, a work of art directs all the refinement of its methods to the *process*. A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and minds of the spectator" (*Film Sense* 17; emphasis in the original). This accords with Iser's examination of Beckett's early trilogy of novels: in *The Implied Reader* he claims that the aesthetic dynamism of those texts lies precisely in the narrators' incessant articulation of contradictory statements that prevent the readers from achieving their cognitive goal of whole-formation (177). Eisenstein would argue, as his vision of the objective of all artistic creation may suggest, that "the desired image is *not fixed or ready-made, but arises – is born*" dynamically out of the combination of the author's creative input and the viewer's or the reader's perceptual and cognitive analysis of it (*Film Sense* 31; emphasis in the original). Consequently, Eisenstein's understanding of the gestalt process presupposes the eventual formation of a concrete whole, however unpredictable, which is based on the dynamics of the work and the individual viewer's subjective comprehension of it. By contrast, while Iser's analysis of Beckett's early trilogy does point out the texts' dynamism, it also accentuates the impossibility, on the reader's part, of achieving any solid and complete apprehension (177).

Rather than employing montage techniques for didactic goals, as it would frequently be the case with Soviet cinema, Beckett draws inspiration from it for aesthetic purposes. This method both mirrors the text's minimalism and allows Beckett to question the conceptions of reliability of knowledge, memory and "objective" reality. The images created by the voice in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, however punctilious their evocation may seem to be, can never be brought fully to life as the novel's overall imagery of "never having been" (73) tends to suggest.<sup>5</sup> The cyclical game that Beckett plays with his readers is based precisely on the interaction between the changeability of the text and the readers' cognitive urge to fill in the gaps produced by it. The voice's guidance through the darkness of the narrative constantly fails since its unreliability as a narrator merges with its performative power not only to create, but also to destroy and recreate differently. Indeed, everything in *Ill Seen Ill Said* emerges out of the darkness only in order to be consumed by this darkness again before it can ever be "properly born".<sup>6</sup>

The imagery of the novel is called forth in such a way as to reflect the unusual, almost monochromatic quality of the visual aspect, a feature typical of many of Beckett's later theatrical pieces and the majority of his works for television. The contrast between light and darkness serves, according to Eisenstein, to stress the work's intensity and dynamics by juxtaposition of two conflicting parts within a structure (*Film Form* 38–39).<sup>7</sup> The quasi-impressionistic arrangement of blacks and whites in the voice's account is reflected in its direct employment of the words themselves, and also indirectly by incorporation of specifically coloured objects in the narrative. For instance, while "all is black" (45) there are still "[c]halkstones of striking effect in the light of the moon" and the reader is called to imagine "[h]ow whiter and whiter as it climbs it whitens more and more the stones" (46). The "[...] chalky soil. Innumerable white scabs all shapes and sizes" is complemented "[a]fter long hesitation" by "ovines" because, as the voice assures itself, "they are white and make do with little" (47), and soon enough the narrator starts regretting not having created "[l]ambs for their whiteness [...] [w]hite splotches in the grass" (48). As the ghostly woman travels from her cabin to the tomb, "[o]n the snow her long shadow keeps her company" (50).

The antithesis of black and white, darkness and light, is present throughout the text and its metaphorical use becomes even more apparent in the passage where the voice first considers the idea of "[l]etting] her vanish. And the rest. For good" (60). Such a moment, in its gradual, step-by-step nature, recalls the inverse process of creation as depicted in the biblical Genesis narrative. After the voice has erased the woman and "the rest", it continues to rid itself of "[...] the sun. Last rays. And the moon. And Venus. Nothing left but black sky. White earth. Or inversely. No more sky or earth. [...] Nothing but black and white. Everywhere no matter where. But black. Void. Nothing else" (60). The ideas of overwhelming blackness and wordless void are yet again contrasted in Beckett and, in this case, tied closely with the creator-created polarity. In his endeavour to "breathe that void" (78) by ceasing to speak, the narrator has to free himself of the objects haunting his imagination and of his existential need to create. As long as the objects can still be perceived they exist – and this is precisely the reason why Beckett's narrator urges himself once again to "[c]ontemplate" them (60). The word "contemplate" here suggests both imagining total destruction as outlined by the narrator in a moment of panic, and re-considering the possible consequences before he resumes his narrative. Paradoxically enough, although the voice possesses the ultimate ability to create as well as to destroy, it can never achieve a complete undoing by means of language: as far as the apocalyptic narrative is recorded in words and thus perceived, it still has to go on existing – and so does the narrator himself.

On the whole, Beckett's employment of the internalized projection upon the reader's mind represents a curious cinematic experiment recorded in words, rather than a reflection of a more common literary tradition of narrative. In addition to the monochromatic visual aspect, the text also uses other specifically filmic notions. These include distinct ways of handling narrative time, textual dynamics arising from various "unexpected conflicts" between the "shots" (Eisenstein, *Film Form* 39) and also, more importantly, utilization of "cuts" and "montage" effects. All these techniques are employed as to fit the general theme of the novel: the narrator's effort to evoke and re-create in the present the subjective images of objects as they might have been once perceived.

The immanent time of the imagining mind constantly alters its pace and is adjusted to the narrator's artistic conduct in a manner that indeed implies a markedly filmic representation of the time passing. Straight from the beginning, the "voice-over" establishes the tense for its inventions: "[a]ll this in the present as had she the misfortune to be still of this world" (45). Such proclamation points to the voice's supremacy over the narrative it conjures up with both the use and the omission of words. The transience of speech mirrors the rapidly transmitted "film frames" that the voice sets into motion, thus making the fleetingness of form echo the elusive nature of the text's content. Particularly in its utilization of the present tense, the voice's account is brought even closer to cinematic representation: because the reader is lured straight into the fragmentary action and instructed to experience it immediately, the temporal aspect of the text calls for its imagined execution in film terms.

For instance, the voice's examination of the "[c]lose-up of a dial" confirms the unusual rendering of narrative time: "[the hand] [l]eaps from dot to dot with so lightening a leap that but for its new position it had not stirred. Whole nights may pass as may but a fraction of a second or any intermediate lapse of time soever before it flings itself from one degree to the next" (69). On other occasions, the narrator forces its own and the reader's imagination to shift "quick to the other window" (46), to "quick seize her" (50), to imagine the curtain "[s]uddenly open. A flash. The suddenness of all!" (52–53) and the woman "[s]uddenly still and as suddenly on her way again" (55), with the night reluctant to fall while she makes for her cabin because "[...] the time slows all this while. Suits its speed to hers" (56). The narrator in turns slows and hastens the time flow, which makes the reader acutely aware of the contrasts in speed between the individual fragments while all action remains tied to the immediate present. This accords with the previously discussed characteristics of spoken language, as well as with the instantaneous nature of action presented on screen: "the [...] tense in film and television is always present (because the image is present on the screen to the spectator) [...] [and] is based on the denotation that derives from the photographic basis of the film and television media" (Bignell 27–8).

The voice's effort to bring into life the image of the ghostly woman, to "reinvoke or resurrect a lost and beloved person," as is said to often be the case with Beckett's television plays (Bignell 28), acquires its powerful effect chiefly by virtue of the text's filmic qualities. It is not easily distinguishable from the voice's chaotic account whether the woman is a dream, a memory or a fantasy. All that is known about her is that she is far from being a "pure figment" (53) in the narrator's confusion of "[t]hings and imaginings" (53), "[t]hat old tandem" (65). However, his obsessive attempts to imagine the woman again and again result in the gradual disintegration of the image, which reveals, after all, her connection with the process of remembering and re-invoking: "Remembrance! When all worse there than when first ill seen [...] Worse than ever. Unchanged for the worse" (74). Consequently, if the individual narrated scenes are viewed as photographs or single film frames, they unquestionably act as a means of preservation of one particular moment when the time is always "that time". If the sequenced stills representing past actions are brought to motion, the result would inevitably be the impression of them coming alive and "being" in the present. Such a mechanism explains the narrator's obsessive need to gather all the images together in his memory: he strives to evoke each of the "frames" with the most detailed precision, re-assembles them in a seemingly correct order and sets them into

motion by way of the ostensible immediacy of representation pertaining to both voice and film. The effect of nostalgia and the woman's relation to former times is crucially supported by the novel's monochromatic aspect, as noted earlier. Beckett himself confirmed that the black and white rendering of the transmitted images "seemed to belong to a more distant fictional time than the implied present of the action seen in colour" – a statement based on the observation and comparison of *Quad I* and *II*, produced in both full colour and monochrome, respectively (Bignell 28).

The alteration in speed of the verbally evoked actions also contributes to the sense of conflict arising from the juxtaposition of individual "shots", and enhances the dynamics of the "film" thus created. If Eisenstein's method of analyzing poetry as singular consecutive camera shots is adopted and applied to the opening sentences of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, some curious observations can be made regarding the filmic quality of its visual aspect. The first three sentences are constructed as follows: "From where she lies she sees Venus rise. On. From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the sun" (45). Avoiding the separation of this section into individual lines of poetry, and instead examining it as intended by the author as three consecutive sentences, the "shooting script" (Eisenstein, *Film Sense* 49) arises as follows:

1. From where she lies (P)
2. She sees Venus rise. (A)
3. On. (x)
4. From where she lies (P)
5. When the skies are clear (P)
6. She sees Venus rise (A)
7. Followed by the sun. (A)

It is observable how the two longer sentences may be divided into two and four images or, for our purposes, "camera shots", respectively.<sup>8</sup> The letters (P) and (A) have been added to mark the passive/active nature of each "shot": in the passive ones no motion is registered, while the active ones show objects in movement. The third "shot", "On" (x), does not transfer any particular image and functions purely as a divide or a pause, and may be apprehended as, for instance, a freeze frame: an effect achieved by a repeated duplication of a single film frame to give the illusion, when the sequence is projected on the screen, of an image frozen in time. Such "frozen tableaux" often reappear in Beckett's theatrical works and can ensure, on the one hand, a perceivable fragmentation of action, and lay additional dramatic emphasis on it on the other.<sup>9</sup> It would be possible to regard "On" merely as a signal for a "cut" between the two parts, but such an identification would deprive it of its temporal function expressing a pause that the voice requires before it can eventually proceed with its narrative. The alternation between active and passive takes, "[s]low systole diastole" (*Ill Seen* 60), as well as between long and short sentences, follows rather meticulously the concept of Eisenstein's conflicting montage: "Rhythm constructed with successive long phrases and phrases as short as a single word, introduces a dynamic characteristic to the image of the montage construction" (*Film Sense* 48).

The choice of words in the opening sentences of *Ill Seen Ill Said* elicits an effect comparable to that of time-lapse cinematography, a technique allowing the filmmaker to

capture processes occurring over prolonged periods of time so that, when projected upon the screen, the action seems to be considerably and unusually accelerated. As early as the mid-1920s, filmmakers and film theoreticians, such as Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein, had been noticing the incredible possibilities of the time-lapse technique. In 1925, Dulac especially stresses the transformation of film into “a sort of microscope” that makes the “slow-motion study” of flowers perceivable to the human eye: with great excitement she talks about “[f]lowers [...] whose [...] birth, blooming, death, and whose infinitesimal development, whose movements equivalent to suffering and joy are unknown to us, appear before us in cinema in the fullness of their existence” (Dulac 60). Epstein likewise praises the “[a]stonishing abridgements in [the] temporal perspective [...] permitted by the cinema – notably in those amazing glimpses into the lives of plants and crystals” (Epstein, 54). *Ill Seen Ill Said* abounds in vivid examples of a similar cinematic enterprise, suggesting Beckett’s attempt at reviving and exploring this powerful visual experience on a textual level. For instance, while the verbs “lies” and “rise” in the opening passage evoke processes of lengthy temporal duration – the movement of celestial bodies in particular – their counterposition in a sentence with the verb “sees”, which on the contrary suggests an immediate and brief action, does indeed create an impression of a film being played in fast-forward. The excerpt is positioned between the sentences depicting the stillness and passivity on the woman’s part, while the “point-of-view shots” of the planet, the Sun and other natural processes display a great degree of activity, which further supports the effect of time lapse: “Rigid upright on her old chair she watches for the radiant one. [...] She sits on erect and rigid in the deepening gloom” (49). The action depicted in the following sentence, “[i]t emerges from out the last rays and sinking even brighter is engulfed in its turn” (49), would normally take a longer period of time and also appears to be notably accelerated and condensed.

For Eisenstein, montage is naturally “inherent in all art” and is essentially “the mightiest means for remoulding nature” (*Film Form* 5). His dialectic approach to film form quite deliberately works to disturb the continuity of a logical storyline: the viewer is presented with a series of discordant, colliding shots, whose “‘dramatic’ principle” (*Film Form* 49) is effected mainly through rhythmic intercutting between them. In this, Eisenstein would oppose Pudovkin’s “‘epic’ principle” of “unrolling” an idea within the narrative structure (*Film Form* 49), the continuity of which Pudovkin himself would perceive as “essential”: “[w]ith the loss of continuity, we lose the unity of the work – its style and, with that, its effect” (32). Nevertheless, Eisenstein’s films would rarely lose their effect and would instead profit immensely from the principles of diversity, collision, and the “dynamics of montage” that would “serve as impulses driving forward a total film” (*Film Form* 38). Not even in the case of Beckett’s novel does the disruption of continuity bring about the loss of its effectiveness as a work of art; Beckett’s idiosyncratic way of constructing his narrative in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is indeed montage-like and theoretically Eisensteinian. Borrowing terminology from film, the major, visible “cuts” in the novel can be said to divide the whole text formally into paragraphs of varying lengths, while the minor ones appear within the paragraphs themselves.

Initially, the effect produced by the text’s division into many individual sections is striking particularly due to the rapid shifts in their subject matter. However, the paragraphs are interconnected with both the preceding and the following chunks of narrative

by slightly varying, yet recurring imagery patterns. These define the voice's account as an endless attempt to grasp a fleeting memory which is always already a subjective fantasy. The cognitive "gaps" arising between the final lines of each of the paragraphs and the opening lines of the successive ones are indeed reminiscent of Eisenstein's approach to film editing. Any major change in the subject of these passages, as well their juxtaposition, elicits an intellectual response from the reader/viewer as he or she attempts to logically link the objects together: "All this in the present as had *she* the misfortune to be still of this world. [End of paragraph. Cut] The *cabin*. Its situation" (45); "Rigid with face and hands against the pane *she* stands and marvels long. [End of paragraph. Cut] *The two zones* form a roughly circular whole" (46, emphases added). The effect of abrupt, cinematic cuts is sometimes accentuated by the narrator's self-addressed commentaries and questions marking both the digressions of his wandering imagination and his enforced attempts at a flawless reconstruction of the narrative he pursues. These commentaries are frequently positioned at the boundaries of individual paragraphs and, similarly to the urging "On" discussed earlier, they cannot merely indicate a "cut". Rather, they precede these "cuts" by suggesting a specific kind of shot similar to a freeze frame, for instance: "Are they always the same? Do they see her? Enough. [End of paragraph. Cut] A moor would have better met the case" (47), "If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be. Gently gently. On. Careful. [End of paragraph. Cut] Here to the rescue two lights. Two small skylights" (53).

A more notable instance of the employment of "cuts" and the conflicts they induce can be perceived within the individual paragraphs themselves. Here again a close examination of the opening section will be illustrative. The voice constructs the initial sequence of five related scenes which are interlocked not only by the objects it evokes, but also by the employment of a technique similar to the cinematic "jump cut" or "stop motion". The former is an editorial device that utilizes an observable interruption to the action within the same shot by accelerating the time flow and abruptly cutting to a later action. The latter produces an effect similar to the earlier discussed time lapse: individual still images are photographed of manually manipulated objects, forging an impression of their independent movement when the frames are projected in a sequence. The effect of "jump cuts" in Beckett's text is thus mostly accomplished by "switching suddenly from one action to another," "cutting from one time to another or from one place to another with the same camera angle or lens," and by "cutting from a long or medium shot to a close-up of the same character or action" (Konigsberg 200). Thus, the major "cuts" occur most notably with each alteration of the woman's position, "an exercise in human origami" (Gontarski vii), as if the camera remained stationary while recording a long shot of the room:

From where she *lies* she sees Venus rise. [...] At evenings when the skies are clear she savours its star's revenge. [Cut] At the other window. *Rigid upright on her old chair* she watches for the radiant one. [...] She *sits* on erect and rigid in the deepening gloom. [Cut] Such helplessness *to move* she cannot help. *Heading on foot* for a particular point often she freezes on the way. [...] [Cut] *Down on her knees* especially she finds it hard not to remain so forever. Hand resting on hand on some convenient support. [...] And on them her head. [Cut] There then she *sits* as though turned to

stone face to the night. (45; Note that only the major “jump cuts” of the woman’s varying positions are indicated. Cuts to close-ups and point-of-view shots are not marked above. All emphases added.)

What must also be noted is the unfolding nature of the words that Beckett makes the voice utter, which increases the narrative’s resemblance to a cinematic project. With each word pronounced, the “camera shots” can also alter, although most unobtrusively to the reader/viewer: “Hand resting on hand” indicates a sudden “close-up” to the woman’s folded hands, which is instantly followed by a slightly broader one, “on some convenient support,” and zooming out further to “[a]nd on them her head.” By providing additional information about its subject, the voice simulates the movement of the imagined camera without explicitly stating the changes to its position and angle: “Seated on the stones she is seen from behind. From the waist up” (58).

Some other unquestionably technical descriptions are frequently featured in the text and speak of Beckett’s familiarity with cinematography. At times, the voice/director/editor employs specific techniques and uses certain terms rather unequivocally: “Close-up then. In which in defiance of reason the nail prevails. Long this image till suddenly it blurs. She is there. Again. Let the eye from its vigil be distracted a moment” (52). The voice often insists on the imagery of its narration being evoked through precisely delineated series of camera movements and angles: “Quick enlarge and devour before night falls” (55); “Just time to begin to glimpse a fringe of black veil. The face must wait” (50); “Woood from below the face consents at last. [...] The lids occult the longed-for eyes. [...] Skipping the nose at the call of lips these no sooner broached are withdrawn” (56); “The hands. Seen from above” (60), “Quick the chair before she reappears. At length. Every angle” (73).

Associated with this is the narrator’s insistence on specific lighting, the sources of which are spatially defined by their connection to points of the compass and the position of objects in relation to those. Therefore, the woman seen from behind has her “[f]ace to the north” and is, in the “[e]ndless evening,” when the sun naturally sets on the west, “lit aslant by the last rays” (59). Similarly, the narrator uses the position of the sun to indicate cinematic effects of lighting elsewhere in the text, emphasizing its striking visuality and almost Eisensteinian conflict between “pieces of graphically varied directions, [...] pieces of darkness and pieces of lightness” (*Film Form* 39): “When from their source in the west-south-west the last rays rake its averse face” (68), “[I]t aslant by the latest rays they cast to the east-north-east their parallel shadows” (68).

As this paper has attempted to show, the symbiotic coexistence of voice and its visual counterpart in the text of *Ill Seen Ill Said* provides a fertile ground for Beckett’s exploration of mechanisms of expression and perception. The inherent qualities of both the aural and the visual aspects lure the readers into a cyclical process which merely equates their perception with mis-comprehension: the narrator’s “ill seen” becomes reproduced in such a way that the result is a disguised imitation of the actual processes of perception. The narrator is a purely vocal presence; his distinctly non-realistic and unspecified nature foreshadows the impossibility of logical closure which his account constantly denies. His attempts to evoke a “living” image of the woman are comparably ironic. The narrator is undoubtedly aware of the possibilities the film form offers in terms of its seeming closeness to perceptual experience, and of its miraculous ability to temporarily “create” objects

and “revive” people. Nevertheless, such an enterprise is doomed to failure from the very outset, simply because “[t]he memory evoked [...] can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so” (Iser 278). Not only does the narrator seem to desire the unattainable, he himself makes it altogether impossible: the infinite, meticulous reformulations of the individual memory fragments rupture and “cut” the action further, rather than create an uninterrupted and solid whole of realistic representation.

“So, montage is conflict,” Eisenstein famously proclaims in *Film Form* (38). Indeed, everything in Beckett’s text, including the text itself, is born from constant conflict, fragmentation and contradiction rather than from undisturbed harmony. To prove his point that our perception, memory, and ways of communication are essentially unreliable, Beckett makes his readers “see” for themselves. *Ill Seen Ill Said* works directly, and solely, with familiarity. Our awareness of the characteristics of spoken language and film are as crucial for the novel’s “being”, as is our habitual experience of reading and comprehending literary texts. All appears to be refuted in Beckett’s work as it ceaselessly tests our senses: “All five. All six. And the rest. All. All to blame. All” (61).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lydie Parisse quoting Ludovic Janvier, Beckett’s friend and translator of his works: “Beckett était obsédé par la voix” (12).

<sup>2</sup> Explicitly stated in the original script of *Film*, George Berkeley’s “Esse est percipi” becomes a major theme for Beckett’s only cinematic project (Beckett, *Collected* 163). James Knowlson likewise notes that Beckett’s “preoccupation with the dynamics of looking [...] runs from Play and Film to *Ill Seen Ill Said*” (Knowlson 618).

<sup>3</sup> “J’ai toujours écrit pour une voix.” (Beckett qtd. in Parisse 12); (Ludovic Janvier qtd. in Parisse 12).

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey qtd. in Iser 288. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>5</sup> A rather common motif in Beckett, the theme is evoked throughout the whole text of *Ill Seen Ill Said*. For instance, the notion of “the odd crocus” (47) born right into a “[w]inter evening. [...] When not night. Winter night” (68), or of a lamb “reared for slaughter like the others” (63). Also, the voice wishing “[d]ead the whole brood no sooner hatched. Long before. In the egg” (64), and the “[d]ay no sooner risen fallen” (72) as it speaks about “[a]ll the fond trash. Destined before being to be no more than that” (76), “[o]f what was never” (77), right before the “pip for end beg[ins]. First last moment” (78).

<sup>6</sup> A Jungian notion that proves to be a recurrent motif running through many of Beckett’s works (Knowlson 616).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Eisenstein discusses “conflicts” between close shots and long shots, “an object and its dimension,” and “an event and its duration” achieved by “stop-motion or slow-motion.” A great number of these conflicts is explored in Beckett’s novel.

<sup>8</sup> In *The Complete Film Dictionary*, Ira Konigsberg proposes to differentiate between the terms “take” and “shot”: “The term is sometimes defined as (1) the single uninterrupted operation of the

camera that results in a continual action we see on the screen and sometimes as (2) the continuous action on the screen resulting from what appears to be a single run of the camera. Since the film resulting from a single run of the camera, however, might itself be edited before appearing as a continuous action on screen or perhaps even broken up into two segments by means of an insert, it is best to refer to (1) as a “take” and only (2) as a “shot” to preserve the sense of continuity and completeness we associate with the term” (358). Because Beckett’s visual fragments indeed appear to be “edited” before they are “played”, this paper utilizes the term “shot” throughout.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Knowlson’s discussion of “frozen tableaux” and Rudolf Arnheim’s legacy in Beckett in Knowlson and Haynes 123–124.

## Bibliography

- Beckett, Samuel. *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- . *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, Stirrings Still*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009.
- . *Disjecta*. London: John Calder, 1983.
- Bignell, Jonathan. *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.
- Dulac, Germaine. “L’Essence du cinéma: L’Idée visuelle.” *Les Cahiers du mois* 16–17 (1925), 64–65. Reprinted as “The Essence of the Cinema: The Visual Idea” in *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. “Film Form.” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory, And The Film Sense*. Ed. and trans. Jay Leyda. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.
- . “The Film Sense.” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory, And The Film Sense*. Ed. and trans. Jay Leyda. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.
- Epstein, Jean. “De quelques conditions de la photogénie.” *Ciné-Cinéa pour tous* 19 (August 1924), 6–8. Reprinted as “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie” in *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Gontarski, S. E. “Introduction.” *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996.
- Knowlson, James and John Haynes. *Images of Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Konigsberg, Ira. *The Complete Film Dictionary*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Parisse, Lydie. *La “parole trouée”: Beckett, Tardieu, Novarina*. Caen: Lettres modernes Minard, 2008.
- Pudovkin, Vsevolod. *Film Technique and Film Acting*. Ed. and trans. Ivor Montagu. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

*Address:*

*Charles University in Prague*

*Faculty of Philosophy & Arts*

*Department of Anglophone Literatures & Cultures*

*nám. Jana Palacha 2,*

*116 38 Praha 1*

*Czech Republic*

*gkiryushina@gmail.com*