ESSE AND PERCIPI IN FILM:
A ‘Note’ upon the Beckett-Schneider ‘Correspondence’

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The status of Berkeley’s thesis (esse est percipi) is open to interpretation in Beckett’s Film, because the perceptions of the spectator must be taken into account when determining the relation between the film and the written notes. The delay which prevents Beckett from sending the completed notes to Schneider until the final edit of the film, has the effect of retrospectively constructing the literary intention behind the film. An excavation of the Beckett-Schneider correspondence reveals that a working version of the script titled ‘The Eye’ is erased by the final version of the ‘script’.

The title of Beckett’s Film gives the ‘impression’ that the work is engaged in a reflexive critique of the medium itself, yet it becomes clear after a single viewing that the position of the spectator is necessarily involved in this process of filmic introspection. Beckett chooses to theorize his own conception of film in terms of the philosopher whose ‘point of view’ most clearly pertains to the essence of film – George Berkeley. The Irish philosopher’s famous maxim (esse est percipi) limits the being of material things to the mode of perception, however the question must be asked: what is the ‘textual’ status of the esse est percipi principle for the spectator who experiences Film? For unless the spectator is actually aware that Beckett is making an ontological statement about the essence of cinema, then it is likely that the significance of the Film will be completely overlooked. The proper experience of watching Beckett (and Schneider’s) Film calls for a supplementary reading of the written notes.

The exact status of Beckett’s written notes remains ambiguous, because the ‘notes’ have appeared in various forms, and have been published in many different contexts. The completed notes appear for the first time in a letter which Beckett sends to Schneider (during the editing process) in September of 1964. Some publishers have chosen
to include the notes alongside Beckett’s shorter plays, however this leads to the naïve conclusion that Schneider’s film is an ‘adaptation’ of Beckett’s original intention: one cannot argue that the film is a reproduction of an original prose work, because the finished notes only come upon the scene as part of the film’s overall production. Nor can the notes be simply considered a set of ‘suggestions’ for Schneider, because Beckett subsequently publishes “Film (a script with illustrations)” as part of the definitive 1972 edition. The only adequate way to approach the notes is to consider them in the context of the film’s actual production, which is given detailed description by Alan Schneider’s essay “On Directing Film”. The notes can be conceptualized as a circulating letter within the written archive of the film’s production. According to this deconstructive concept of the archive, the erasure of the written notes from the spectator’s experience of the film, is the impossible condition of the possibility for them to reappear within the film – as a ‘trace’ of the postal circuit which regulates the Beckett-Schneider correspondence.

The hostile reaction of the audience to the first screening of Film at the New York Film Festival in the summer of 1965, serves to highlight the pivotal position of the philosophical schema in relation to the actual experience of watching the film. Schneider makes the point that the film “was sandwiched between two Keaton shorts”, and explains that it failed to satisfy the audience for two reasons: first, because Beckett ‘screens’ the appearance of Keaton's face until the end of the film (“The professional film festival audience of critics and students of film-technique started laughing at the moment the credits came on, roaring at that lovely grotesque close-up of Bustor’s eyelid. For good. All through the next twenty minutes they sat there, bored, annoyed, baffled, and cheated of the Keaton they had come to see”, 93); second, because no-one was aware of Beckett’s use of Berkeley’s maxim (“The critics, naturally, clobbered or ignored us […] and even told us how stupid we were to keep Keaton’s back to the camera until the end. As to the “message” – esse est percipi – not one had a clue”, 93). It should be noted that these two reasons are intimately related, because the concealment of Keaton’s pantomime is a direct consequence of the cinematic convention which Beckett establishes in order to prevent the gaze of the Eye (E) confronting the face of the Object (O). Therefore, the loss of Keaton’s pantomime is compensated by the profundity of Beckett’s message. The limited range of camera place-