Far from working directly on celluloid, as some experimental filmmakers do, Samuel Beckett labored over his filmscript for *Film*, and many of his most interesting and revealing struggles with material and medium took place before the script was completed. Beckett's revisions for its composition reveal not only characteristic aesthetic preoccupations but also the particular difficulties Beckett had with film. In the composition of *Film*, we see a word man groping with an unfamiliar medium.

A full biography of the composition of *Film* is not now possible because textual evidence is not as complete as for other works. Beckett's primary creative effort is recorded in a gold, soft-covered, seventy-leaf notebook (22 cm × 17 cm exterior measurement), now on deposit at the University of Reading's Beckett Archive, which contains two full holograph versions of *Film*. The first, called both “Notes for Film” and “‘Percipi’ Notes,” dated Ussy, 5 April 1963 (that is, 5.4.63), consists of sixteen pages (Beckett’s pagination) and was completed at Ussy on 9 April 1963. The subtitle Beckett began with is an accurate description of the work: “For Eye and Him [revised to “One”] who do not wish [revised to “would not’] be seen” (p. 2). The version on the title page suggests that he has a very clear idea of the nature of this work from the beginning: “For one striving to see one striving not to be seen.” This earliest version is followed on pages 17–19 by a series of holograph notes and by a
second version, called "Outline Sent to Grove," undated at the start, which continues on pages 20–36, and was completed in Ussy on 22 May 1963. The second draft is also followed by "notes," pages 36–47. (The remaining twenty-three leaves are blank except for the last, where, in June of 1963, Beckett began his translation of Texts for Nothing.) The earliest typescript, dated May 1963 and on deposit at Washington University, St. Louis, is six leaves long. The notes in this version are again separate, in holograph, written on six graph-paper leaves, foliated 7–12. Finally, the Reading Beckett Archive owns a forty-leaf "Shooting Script," with 20 July 1964 noted as the shooting date. Moreover, the primary textual material is augmented by a transcript of a production conference, and a series of fourteen comments (thirteen numbered, one not) that Beckett made after seeing a rough cut of his film.

The earliest notes available suggest that Beckett apparently began the composition of his film uncharacteristically, with a clearly established theme that remained unaltered throughout (though simplified, of necessity, in shooting), the Berkeleyan philosophical principle "esse est percipi" (that is, being is being perceived): "Eye: Those who look at Eye [on] street stairs turn horrified away." Beckett calls this early draft "percepi’ notes" (p. 2) and refers, further, to "H [Him] perceiving perceived by E" (p. 1). Beckett’s major creative problems here were to develop and to shape visual images not in order to embrace Berkeley’s idealism but rather to explore the essential human consequences that follow from the philosophical proposition; or, in Beckett’s words, "No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience." This comment stands as a fundamental component in Beckettian aesthetics. Beckett’s art is often more concerned with formal relationships than with something we might call theme. In his production conference, Beckett explained the formal importance of the opening (lost in shooting): "I want to fortify the analogy between the inspection of the street and the inspection of the room in the complete series by having the elements involved inspected in the same order. If it’s 1-3-5-2-7-6... we give numbers to the elements in the room—exactly in the same
order—by E in the street and by O in the room. . . . It’s a kind of integrity, formal integrity.”

Despite the film’s abstract theme and Beckett’s concern with formal balance, his early creative concerns are with realistic detail, with fixing his work in a precise time and place, with setting O in a particular place, in a particular year, at a particular time of day. In the early pages of his notebook, Beckett explores a series of possibilities. The time is changed from 1914 to 1929. The time of day is at first “midday or early afternoon,” then, temporarily, “evening.” But this is rejected: “Not evening, to remove possibility of his putting off light in room. Midday. Street animated by midday break. Or early morning and people on the way to work. Not Winter in this case.” Even O’s age is specifically set at “50”; yet he is also said to have been “25 in 1914.” Beckett’s mathematics may be a bit off; if O was born in 1889, he should be 40 in 1929, but arithmetic is less in question here than the fact that in Beckett’s early stages of composition, matters of time and place are important to him. As the work develops, however, these realistic underpinnings are mostly eliminated as Beckett moved characteristically toward higher levels of abstraction. And in his production conference, Beckett consistently stressed the near abstract nature of the whole film: “it’s on an absolute street . . . absolute exterior, absolute . . . transition . . . abstract almost.” “The principle of the room,” Beckett continues, “is to seek the minimum . . . a formal minimum. Even the table that carries the . . . bowl . . . just a support . . . a kind of abstract support.”

In addition to the setting’s being more concrete in the early versions of Film, Beckett is very concerned with logical motivation for O’s behavior, and in fact the plot is generally more realistic than the final one. Such realistic preoccupation, evident in this early notebook for Film, seems almost the fulfillment of Beckett’s 1936 comment to V. I. Pudovkin that he wanted to “revive the naturalistic, two-dimensional silent film” (italics mine). In the final film, however, O’s reasons for avoiding perception, his desire to negate being, his reasons for going to the room—that is, much of what might pass for plot in the film—are absent. Yet in the holograph versions, motivation is
clear, and in composition this information is transferred to the "Notes." Only there do we learn that O has gone to his mother’s room, to which he has not been for some time, to care for her pets while she is in the hospital. Such information is potentially very revealing, even autobiographical, yet Beckett denigrates it: "This has no bearing on the film and need not be elucidated" (p. 59). Yet in his production conference, Beckett returns to these realistic underpinnings by way of "explaining" the film. "One might suppose," he tells the crew, "that his mother has gone to hospital." With this information, of course, the film makes more logical sense, is considerably more conventional, and is even potentially autobiographical. It provides a psychological reason for O’s escaping being, responding to fears and uncertainties surrounding his mother’s illness or impending death (she, after all, must be quite old). As such the film is another study of the possible responses to loss and precedes by only three months Beckett’s discarded monologue of an orphaned girl in "Kilcool." In fact, with the knowledge that the room is his mother’s, we can see another variation on the theme of a mother’s death that we find in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Footfalls.* Beckett finally cut most suggestions of the film’s realistic, psychological, logical level. In the notebook version, for instance, O carries “a suitcase,” which might suggest a lengthy stay, not the final "briefcase." As late as the typescript, Beckett had O compare the apartment number against a slip of paper from his pocket, and further, he entertained the possibility that the picture on the wall would be one of O. Almost nothing in the final film hints at this realistic level. Why O is in this room would remain an enigma without Beckett’s published notes. But in the production conference, Beckett frequently refers to the realistic subtext of his film. One reason he posits for O’s bumping into the couple is that he is “wondering has he got the right house... looking up the street.”

Although Beckett was firm about the absence of dialogue from the start, the film was originally intended to contain more sound than the final, single "ssh." The opening scene was to include at least realistic sound: “No cars. One cab drawn by cantering nag, (hooves) driver standing brandishing whip. Bicycles” (p. 3). After O’s incident with the couple, we were to
hear, “Sound of his panting” (p. 6). The opening scene was lost in filming to the strobe effect, but the panting was cut by design, and with the cuts more of the realistic level of the film was eliminated. Beckett was clearly interested in emphasizing the unreal, stylized, comic qualities of the film. He wanted to stress the “unreal quality” of the room. Of O’s walk Beckett says, “He storms along in comic foundered precipitancy” (Film, p. 12). And in a notebook entry, Beckett reminds himself, “O as comic physically as possible. Short fat in preference to tall thin (because of chair)” (p. 17). Of the film generally, Beckett notes, “Climate of film comic and unreal” (Film, p. 12). The emphasis on the comic and unreal is designed to counter the realistic nature of the medium and the potentially melodramatic plot. He even entertained the possibility that the dog and cat routine should be an animated cartoon but rejected that idea quickly on formal grounds, “then others necessary, two more at least.” In a set of written comments (also on deposit at the Beckett Archive of the University of Reading) that Beckett made after seeing an early version of the film, he expressed disappointment about the dog and cat scene: “Because I don’t feel the animal gag at all funny, I find it too long. Mais libre à vous.”

This statement is the clearest we have that Beckett seems to have been unsuccessful, to have lost some control over the project.

The most revealing portions of the notebook versions demonstrate Beckett’s struggling with his medium, trying to subjugate it to theme. Most of his problems were technical. E’s point of view, Beckett notes, should not be compromised, so that E and O never share the same field of vision, and the perceptions of E and O are mutually exclusive. As Beckett notes to himself, H (that is, O) “perceives only when he feels himself not seen, i.e., when E directly or nearly directly behind him. . . . When he feels himself seen, or beginning to be seen, he closes his eyes” (p. 1). This technical limitation understandably upset Buster Keaton because his face then would almost never be on film. O could never turn 90° and perceive an object, since in that relationship with E, O would close his eyes and cease perception. This sort of convention, of course, imposes an extraordinary limitation on movement in the film. It is theme limiting the possibilities of medium.
A second problem that Beckett had to contend with resulted from his major cinematic innovation; he had to distinguish in quality the perception of E and O. O’s perception had originally been restricted to the room, but in filming, Beckett (or someone on the crew) decided to prepare for the images of different quality that were to appear in the room sequence. This question of different perceptions, Beckett notes, “poses a problem of images which I cannot solve without technical help” (Film, p. 12). He rejects, however, any attempt to express the images simultaneously, as by “composite images, double frame, superimposition, etc.” (Film, p. 58). Once again technique remains in the service of theme as Beckett rejects any physical image suggesting unity and any technical sophistication of the medium. The solution is clumsy, as O’s perception is a bit fuzzy, shot through a gauze filter, a solution originally entertained in his notebook (p. 9).

The most interesting thematic use of medium that Beckett contemplated was ultimately rejected, probably because it would have altered the climactic tone. In the final image, the investment, Beckett wanted to suggest that E and O are mirror images of each other. E then would be “alter O” (p. 9). The penultimate image would be O, patch over right eye, frowning, followed by E, patch over left eye, smiling. Photographically, we would have had a print and its negative, the smile even a reversal of the frown. But the final image would have been Keaton’s smiling face, and the bit of playfulness with the medium would have disrupted the final tonal balance. Beckett cut the sequence with the final comment, “impossible.”

That bit of mirror-image playfulness would also have detracted from the ending ironies. For one, we see that we may be most conscious of self-perception, or rather it may, like Proustian memory, come crashing into our consciousness, when our defenses are weakest, as in dreams, but it is always with us. The lack of self-perception is merely an illusion, for we see O even when he believes he is not being perceived; we and the camera perceive him even when he is “safely” within what Beckett calls the “angle of immunity.” And here again we have Beckett exploiting his medium, using the camera as a relentless, omnipresent perceiver. Much of the artistic struggle with Film
was technical from the first. As late as the production confer-
ence, Beckett suggested that his principal problem was to find
technical equivalents to the two visions: "we're trying to find a
technical equivalent . . . a visual, technical, cinematic equiva-
 lent for visual appetite and visual distaste . . . a reluctant . . . a
disgusted vision [O's] and a ferociously . . . voracious one
[E's]."

Despite Beckett's technical achievements with Film, the work
never coalesces. Beckett seems, at almost every stage of the
creative process, to have been engaged in a battle with his
medium. The immediate rapport between artist and machine
evident in the composition of Krapp's Last Tape, for example, is
missing in Film. Despite his attempts, the final product appears
to have been something different from what Beckett wanted,
more realistic, less comic. He tried to maintain an atmosphere
of unreality, to move the work toward higher levels of abstrac-
tion, to dramatize a fundamentally internal conflict, to balance
or counteract the pathetic level of the film with comedy, but the
final atmosphere of the film remains realistic, the conflict more
external than internal, and much of its comedy falls flat. Admit-
tedly, some of Beckett's original vision was lost in translating
script to film, including some of the formal symmetry that has
been such an aesthetic preoccupation in the later work. But the
replacement of the early street sequences with the opening eye
seems to have been fortuitous. It moved the film further along
toward the desired unreality and abstraction and was themati-
cally consistent with the emphasis on perception. Further, the
opening eye provided the initial disruption of audience expecta-
tion that Beckett is so fond of, especially in plays like Not I and
That Time, which feature body parts as the primary stage image,
and as such the eyeball anticipates those later plays. But the
image may finally lack subtlety and integration. It may disrupt
initially, but assaults only temporarily. Our sense of security is
quickly restored once we view the street scenes. And the eye-
ball simply does not dominate the work as do the mouth of Not
I or the floating head of That Time. In the manuscripts of Film,
we can see clearly what Beckett would like to do, in what direc-
tion he was trying to shape the play; but in the final work, we
can also see much of that intention unrealized. Perhaps the
work began with too rigid a design. Unlike *Film* most of Beckett’s works take their shape through the act of composition. *Film* seems to be one of Beckett’s least existential works, since essence exists well before being. What we are left with in *Film* is a string of unsolved problems. Beckett does not solve these problems for another two years, some nine months after the actual shooting of *Film*, when he turns to television drama, restricts himself to the room, uses the camera as a slowly advancing, penetrating force, and can dramatize the interior struggle, the voices in the skull as effectively as he does in *Eh Joe*. But Beckett does not fully achieve the sort of “formal minimum” he mentioned at the production conference until *Ghost Trio* and . . . but the clouds. . . .


2. See Richard L. Admussen, The Samuel Beckett Manuscripts: A Study (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 48. Admussen notes, “one or more drafts are missing between A and B,” that is, between the notebook at Reading and the typescript at Washington.


4. A tape of this production conference, which included Alan Schneider (director), Boris Kaufman (cinematographer), Barney Rossett (producer), and Samuel Beckett, is on deposit at Syracuse University. This is probably the poolside conference Schneider refers to in “On Directing *Film*.” Quotations used with the permission of Samuel Beckett. My thanks to Martha Fehsenfeld for her transcript.


7. *Film* was reshot in 1979 by David R. Clark for the British Film Institute. Max Wall played O. This version, while interesting in its own right, runs counter to the direction Beckett was trying to move his work in the manuscripts and in the filming. Clark shot his *Film* in color, added music (Schubert’s “Der Doppelgänger”), reintroduced sounds Beckett specifically cut from his script, and added vaudeville routines (O gets his foot stuck in a bundle of rope early in the film and, in the room, keeps kicking his briefcase away as he bends to retrieve it). Clark’s version of *Film* is not necessarily worse or better than Schneider’s, but it is considerably different from the film Beckett was trying to make. See “*Film* Refilmed,” The Beckett Circle 1 (Fall 1978).