

Keyhole Art: Voyeurism, the Scopophilic Drive and the Appeal of Beckett's Theatre

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Resumo: Um motivo aparentemente menor que ressoa através dos primeiros textos de ficção de Samuel Beckett, a escopofilia ou voyeurismo marca presença no conto "Walking Out". Voyeurismo para Freud era algo de dupla face, inexoravelmente ligado ao exibicionismo, e a correlação de ambos atravessa o teatro tardio de Beckett, muitas vezes chamado de "buraco da fechadura" ou "teatro do olho mágico". No teatro voyeurismo torna-se uma experiência estética, artística. A audiência incrementa sua cumplicidade no atos de voyeurismo que testemunha e essa atração para o que Freud denomina "instinto de visibilidade" ou exibicionismo, particularmente para a virtuosidade do autor. Se o teatro de Beckett (e também muito de sua ficção) explora a complementariedade entre voyeurismo e exibicionismo, como este artigo sustenta, e toda literatura envolve certa versão de invasão de privacidade, e o olhar, segundo Blau, "é compulsivo e nunca se satisfaz", o teatro, então se vincula mais diretamente com ocultar que revelar.

Palavras-chave: Escopofilia, voyeurismo, teatro do olho mágico, Freud, Ovídio, Narciso, *Fim de Partida*, *theoria*, Heidegger, Herbert Blau, Kenneth Tynan, William Gibson.

Abstract: An apparently minor motif that resonates through Samuel Beckett's early fiction, scopophilia or voyeurism is featured most overtly in Beckett's short story, "Walking Out." Voyeurism for Freud was a binary, inexorably linked to exhibitionism, and the interplay of the two runs through Beckett's late, "closed space" fiction and, most importantly, through his late theater, not infrequently called "keyhole" or "peephole drama." In theater, then, voyeurism becomes an aesthetic, artistic experience. The audience may grow increasingly complicit in the acts of voyeurism it witnesses and in its attraction to what Freud called the "phanic drive," or exhibitionism, in particular that of the author's virtuosity. If Beckett's theater (and much of his fiction as well) explores the complementary drives of voyeurism and exhibitionism, as this essay contends, that is, all literature may involve some version of invasion of privacy, and the looking, in Blau's words, "is compulsive and unrelieved," the theater is, finally, as much concerned with concealment as revelation. Most of Beckett's late plays, plays at least from *Play* onward, say, are enhanced by viewing them in terms of the voyeuristic imperative of theater, or, or at least through the interplay of voyeurism and exhibitionism,

Keywords: Scopophilia (scopophilic), voyeurism, peephole drama, Freud, Ovid, Narcissus, *Endgame*, phanic drive, *theoria*, Heidegger, Herbert Blau, "eye of prey," Kenneth Tynan, William Gibson.

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An apparently minor motif that resonates through Samuel Beckett's early fiction, voyeurism is featured most overtly in Samuel Beckett's short story "Walking Out," where bride-to-be Lucy wonders if her dear Bel, one Belacqua Shuah, could be "a creepy-crawly" (116). Indeed the name "Shuah," family name of the central figure in Beckett's series of connected stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, suggests "low-lying" in Hebrew, and Belacqua not only delights in the solitary pleasures of observing copulating couples in [peeping] "Tom's Wood," but at finding that Lucy has secretly spied on him. The pleasure in watching (what Freud calls the scopophilic drive) the young German girl and her Harold's Cross Tanzherr is foreshortened as Belacqua himself is discovered mid-indulgence and soundly thrashed (Harold's Cross is a decidedly rough area of south Dublin, near Donnybrook). Fortunately for the maintenance of his spiritual union and his sublimated sexuality, Bel's lovely Lucy suffers a terrible accident, so the couple can be happily married and never consummate their relationship and never allude to the past. That is, Bel's voyeurism is part of the motif of spiritual, ghostly, or other-worldly union, its undercurrent the "noli me tangere" of Christ's resurrection (that is, John 20: 11-15 where Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father"). In *That Time*, for instance, narrator B returns to the theme: "no sight of the face or any other part never turned to her not she to you [. . .] never turned to each other [. . .] no touching or anything of that nature always space between if only an inch no pawing in the manner of flesh and blood" (391). Voyeurism for Freud was a binary as well, inexorably linked to exhibitionism, and the interplay of the two runs through Beckett's late, "closed space" fiction and the late theater, not infrequently called "keyhole" or "peephole drama."

In the prequel to "Walking Out," the aborted novel *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, Belacqua is called a "hedgecreeper" (72), and similar activities are outlined. The Schule Dunkelbrau (and here Beckett playfully substituting the dark beer for the Schule Hellerau, the lightness of Hellerau replaced by the darkness of Dunkelbrau), for example, is on the fringe of a park, "more beautiful and tangled far than the Bois de Boulogne or any other multis latebra opportuna [that is, many a secret opportunity] than it is possible to imagine" (13); this gives the Viennese "swells" the chance to watch: "The Dunkelbrau gals were very Evite and nudist [. . .] . In the summer they lay on the roof and bronzed their bottoms and impudenda" (13). The Latin phrase, *multis latebra opportune*, "many a secret opportunity," derives from Book 3 of Ovid's

Metamorphoses (III,.443), the words of Narcissus to the woods about him as he pines away for self-love. The phrase simultaneously suggests some of the author's own literary exhibitionism, his flouting of esoteric learning. In *Beckett's Dream Notebook*, where he recorded and translated numerous quotations from Ovid, this is cited with a cryptic "Bois de Vincennes," that Paris park evidently the complementary other to the Bois de Boulogne, the one as good as the other it seems for what Beckett calls a "looking place" (160). Ovid's phrase is repeated in *Murphy*, Chapter 5, where it refers to Market Road Gardens, which is "opportune for many" (74), with similar intonations, but there the allusion is treated more frivolously, with the exception of the distinction between a voyeur and a voyant (90), which reflects Rimbaud's desire to be a seer. Wylie in the aforementioned novel, moreover, has also worshiped Miss Counihan from afar, "all last June, through Zeiss glasses, at a watering place" (60). The scene is echoed in *How It Is* where the narrator's sense of "life in the light" is reflected in the first image of another creature: "I watched him after my fashion from afar through my spy-glass sidelong in mirrors through windows at night" (9).

Miss Carriage has hopes, doomed to frustration, as she watches through the keyhole as Cooper prepares for bed (256). Moran's son instinctively imitates his father by spying upon him: "I caught a glimpse of my son spying on us from behind a bush. . . . Peeping and prying were part of my profession. My son imitated me instinctively" (*Molloy*, 94).

If *Dream* asserts that the author and so the reader peep and creep and otherwise eavesdrop on private lives, particularly when characters are dressing (207), later works are less overtly concerned with such matters, but related themes of concealed perception and the pleasure of being secretly perceived persist. The "shuttered judas" in the padded cells of the inmates at the MMM in *Murphy* permits the custodian to observe the lunatic secretly (181). That padded, monadic space excludes all the world, except the prying, spying eye that observed unobserved the inmates' nakedness. In addition to approximating the little world to which Murphy aspires, the padded cell anticipates the intimate performance space of Beckett's late theatre, and *Murphy* projects himself as both the voyeur and voyant.

It is in the theater then that voyeurism is the artistic experience. In *Endgame*, Clov takes up the telescope to spy through the frame of the windows for signs of life, the window a metatheatrical echo of the framed theatrical space. And the play ends with the voyeurism game,

Clov apparently unobserved, but observed by the audience, observing Hamm. In *Film*, which opens with a close up of a reptilian eye, the voyeur E (for eye) is again the protagonist as O is the object of E's prying eye, the camera eye peeping as the audience shares the eavesdropping, as it does in *Film's* sequel, *Eh Joe*. This is Berkeleyan, of course, as any number of critics have pointed out, *esse est percipi*, but it is Freudian as well. This is identical to the sense that the characters have in *Waiting for Godot* and elsewhere (*Texts for Nothing, Happy Days*) that they are being watched, witnessed if not spied upon. Character M in "Play" suggests the central dramatic, ontological, and sexual problem in that play when he asks, "Am I as much as being seen?" His comment is, of course, self-reflexive, implying that theater is inherently a voyeuristic medium, the audience from the safety of the dark spying on the "life [so called] in the light." But in "Walking out," an Hiberno-English description of courtship, Belacqua experiences a reciprocal seduction, one passive, his voyeurism, one active, his exhibitionism, the one generating as much libidinous energy and frisson as the other.

The audience may grow increasingly complicit in the acts of voyeurism it witnesses and its attraction to what Freud called the "phallic drive," or exhibitionism, in particular that of the author's virtuosity. If, as Freud asserts, the "visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused," and art the means by which these impressions might be sublimated, that sublimation is the equivalent of the "phallic drive." The two drives (or instincts), "a mania for looking [and] exhibitionism," are corollaries of one another. Freud outlines the relationship most directly in *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*:

The little child is, above all, shameless, and during his early years, he evinces definite pleasure in displaying his body and specially his sex organs. A counterpart to this pervasive desire, the curiosity to see other persons' genitals, probably appears first in the later years of childhood when the hindrance of the feeling of shame has already reached a certain development. Under the influence of seduction, the looking perversion may attain great importance for the sexual life of the child. Still, from my investigation of the childhood years of normal and neurotic patients, I must conclude that the impulse for looking can appear in the child as a spontaneous sexual manifestation. Small children, whose attention has once been directed to their own genitals—usually by masturbation—are wont to progress in this direction without outside interference and to develop a vivid interest in the genitals of their playmates. As the

occasion for the gratification of such curiosity is generally afforded during the gratification of both excrementitious needs, such children become *voyeurs* and are zealous spectators at the voiding of urine and feces of others. After this tendency has been repressed, the curiosity to see the genitals of others (one's own or those of the other sex) remains as a tormenting desire which in some neurotic cases, furnishes the strongest motive-power for the formation of symptoms. (597)

But the inquiry into concealed meanings that Freud sees as almost exclusively sexual is the heart of theoretical inquiry as well. In his essay "Science and Reflection," Martin Heidegger reflects on the origins of the word "theory" in the Greek *theoria*, which derives from *theorein* and evokes *thea*, the root of theater. The "theater of vision" is thus the drive for the knowable or the known, a scopophilic drive. Both theory and theater constitute the drive toward knowledge that informs science and philosophy as well. Heidegger goes on to link the drive to the goddess Thea and its pursuit that of truth. Herbert Blau takes "scopophilic desire" as the central metaphor for his collection of meditations on theater, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern*: "the scopic drive,' the desire to see, to see what maybe should not be seen, the intensely specular consciousness which, in refusing that prohibition, is another obsession of the theory that seems to be thinking about itself" (xxii), that is, theater. Blau's image of seeing is the aggressive, devouring eye, the "eye of prey," the image borrowed from Beckett (*Imagination Dead Imagine*, 185) and Blau concludes, "In Beckett we are always looking at what, perhaps, should not be looked at" (78).

If Beckett's theater (and much of his fiction as well) explores the complementary drives of voyeurism and exhibitionism, as this paper contends, that is, all literature may involve some version of invasion of privacy, and the looking, in Blau's words, "is compulsive and unrelieved," the theater is, finally, as much concerned with concealment as revelation. As we peer at partially lit images in the dark, we may yearn for more exposure, more disclosures, but much is suppressed, repressed, more re-veiled than revealed. Beckett's theater remains a site of resistance and concealment as well. Victor Krap refuses to tell his story frustrating family, friends, and spectators (one of whom attacks the actors over the issue), and Godot (apparently) stubbornly refuses to disclose himself. And what Hamm yearns for most persistently is for some light. The interplay of light and dark, Hellerau and Dunkelbrau, disclosure and concealment, is the dominant trope of Beckett's theater from *Krapp's Last Tape* onward, as we watch an old man

perform nearly lewd acts with a banana and overindulge his senses with spirits. We come closer to witnessing the forbidden in "Eh, Joe," as Joe goes through his evening routine to eliminate perceivers, voyeurs, as he prepares for bed. The almost useless Auditor of *Not I*, who apparently signifies something like "helpless compassion," at least according to stage directions, is more important as a witness, an apparently unobserved spectator, than as a participant. When the BBC filmed the stage play for television, Auditor was eliminated not only to maintain a tight, close-up image of Billie Whitelaw's spittle stained lips, but because the television camera became the voyeur, the unobserved observer. All the better that more than a few critics commented on the possibility that the central image was vaginal. And the altered perspective of *That Time* may suggest that we are observing a bedded patient in his death throes. The stunning, mannerist theatrical device is Listener's face, slightly off-center, a disembodied head ten feet above the stage, listening to three voices (recorded, not performed) coming from the dark as aspects of his past. The stage image is an exercise in perspective, the head with hair flared as if seen from above, the audience presumably below the feet like the illusionistic *di sotto in sù* technique in Andrea Mantegna's *Foreshortened Christ*. The image of life in its dying moments was all the more poignant when the role was played by Julian Beckett as he was dying from cancer.

Most of Beckett's late plays, plays at least from *Play* onward, say, are enhanced by viewing them in terms of the voyeuristic imperative of theater, or, or at least the interplay between voyeurism and exhibitionism, but the most curious example is the one play treated by its producers in the most overtly voyeuristic way; that is, Beckett's shortest (roughly 25-seconds) and arguably his most "popular" play, "Breath." The play is simplicity itself, an anonymous life cycle reduced to its fundamental sounds. A debris-littered stage with "No verticals," a brief cry and inspiration as lights fade up for ten seconds and hold for five; then expiration and slow fade down of light and "immediately cry as before." The two, recorded cries of vagitus are identical, as is the lighting on fade up and fade down. The simplicity is symmetrical, recalling Pozzo's poignant comment: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Although SB called it a "farce in five acts" it is something less than an evening's theater. It's most dramatic performance, so to speak, was as the "Prelude" to Jacques Levy and Kenneth Tynan's sextravaganza, *Oh Calcutta*, the title a sexual pun on the French, "O quel cul t'as". John Calder claims that Tynan commissioned the work directly for the revue; but Ruby Cohn disputes

this provenance, noting in conversation that Beckett had recited it to her years before, and that what Calder published was only a fair copy but not the original, which SB had written for Calder on the paper tablecloth of a café [RC to SG]. The prescient Tynan understood the voyeuristic appeal of theater, and so added a line to Beckett's opening tableau; to Beckett's "Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish," Tynan added three words, "including naked people." The review, and so presumably Beckett's little, if not slight, play, enjoyed enormous, unprecedented success. After an unusually high number of previews, 39, a precaution to test the mettle of official local censors, the play moved to Broadway on 26 February 1971 and ran until 6 August 1989. 85 million people saw 1314 performances, making it easily Samuel Beckett's most viewed, and perhaps celebrated play, a record unlikely to be broken.

Beckett was not exactly complicit in the "sextravaganza" and was finally appalled by Tynan's alteration, but his contract forbade interference. Worse, Barney Rosset, Beckett's American publisher, included the excrescence in an illustrated book version of the play, publishing photographs of Tynan's revised imagery and attributing the work to Beckett (Grove, 1969). The infamous association with *Oh Calcutta* is generally seen as an aberration in Beckett's theater, the association acknowledged officially only in *Collected Shorter Plays* (1984) and *Complete Dramatic Works* (1986). As aberrant as it admittedly was, Tynan's production may suggest something about the appeal to Beckett's late drama and even something of possible future stagings.

When I came to direct the play myself I wanted to present it as an independent entity not as part of an evening of theater. Moreover, I wanted to explore not only the play's avant-garde potential, its power to subvert or defy conventions and expectations, but I wanted to foreground the voyeuristic appeal of the play. For such a performance I needed something other than a traditional theatrical venue. The opportunity presented itself in December of 1992 when I was invited to participate in an evening of art, theater and readings at the Florida State University Gallery and Museum. The evening would be built around the electronic satellite reception of a piece of hypertext, *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* from novelist William Gibson. The Gibson piece was scheduled for simultaneous broadcast to nine sites around the world, immediately after which the piece would be distorted and destroyed by its own viruses. The overall plan for the evening was to use the gallery as a decentered theater space so that performances would be

staged in several venues in the gallery, and the audience would drift from venue to venue. Rather than follow the structure of an outdoor fair where simultaneous performances are offered to an audience free to move about at will, the gallery evening would offer sequential performances without overlap but at a variety of venues to which the audience would be guided by lighting cues. The evening then would entail readings, theatrical performances, and environments to explore among the gallery's various rooms.

I began to plan the production with voyeuristic imagery in mind. Since, like all of Beckett's short plays, "Breath needed a frame, and since the traditional proscenium arch was unavailable in the gallery, I would have to create my own frame, that is, a structure through which the audience could peer. Rather than build a proscenium arch, however, I built a huge television screen, behind which "Breath" would be performed "live," or at least the pile of "miscellaneous rubbish" was physically present in the gallery. In the printed program I called the performance "A Simulated Television Production." But the heap of "miscellaneous rubbish" was of a piece with other installations in the gallery so that Beckett's "play" was for many indistinguishable from other art objects on display (or from the gallery's refuse outside the service entrance, for that matter). Mine, or rather Beckett's, was simply framed by a simulated television screen.

With that oversized, simulated television screen, I thought to merge the detachment of television with the intimacy of live theater, that is, I could offer hot and cold media simultaneously and to merge theater with sculpture. The performance of "Breath," as opposed to the gallery's other sculptures, would be "announced" by the light's fading up on the set, that is, on the heap of rubbish some ten feet behind the television screen, as the gallery lights simultaneously dimmed. The brief (birth) cry and amplified inspiration would sound for some ten second, and after the prescribed five second pause, the expiration and identical cry of some ten seconds. Fade down the stage; fade up the gallery.

The performance was repeated several times during the evening, interspersed amid other performances. Since I had deliberately chosen to associate Beckett's "play" with sculpture by the very fact of offering the performance in an art gallery, I was not surprised that the audience never seemed to understand that it was watching live theatre since the performance lacked, after all, what had heretofore been an essential ingredient of live theater, live actors. The audience, deprived of its standard ambience and cultural signals for theatre, failed to applaud at the fade

down, but neither did they applaud the viewing of other sculptures, even when the gallery lights dimmed as they did to announce another performance. And, of course, there was no curtain call for "Breath." In part I took that lack of response to the performance as a measure of the success of this production which had blurred the distinction among artistic forms, but while I may have it to a neo-dadaist revival of found sculpture. Most encouraging, however, was the audience sneaking looks at the tangle of material between performances, unsure of whether or not it was permissible to peer into the darkness through what on one level was a hole in a wall. I thought for a time to put up a sign between performances that said "No peeking."

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