

In Search of the Lost Void

“I’m going into the boudoir to change into something more comfortable”. In this way, Jeannie-Gena Rowlands in “Faces” leaves her two male guests, Jack and Freddie, to wait, but before crossing the threshold of eros inaccessible par excellence, the boudoir, she hurls at them the post-modern anathema of the super-ego: “Don’t worry. You shall feel many guilts, but remain pure”. The accused here is expectation, punished by the elimination of the object vested with desire, trousers in place of the longed-for negligee. If desire, once the object of sublimation, remains a drive, the Ego also loses its representative function, the one that confers meaning on the object, on an idea. According to Freud in “The Ego and the Id”, the Ego, “the representative of the outer world to the Id”, shifts the libido of the Id from the “satisfaction of direct sexual tendencies” first to the Ego itself in the form of narcissistic libido, then “if necessary pointing to another objective to this last” in other words transforming the “objectual investments” of the Id from direct to indirect. This sublimation allows the Ego to dominate the Id and to control its libido according to the principle of reality, that’s to say according to the perception of the outer world. Further, while for Freud “The Ego is first and foremost a bodily Ego” and “not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of surface”, in the 1927 English translation a note appears that is not present in the German edition, but that is believed to have been corroborated by Freud, whereby “The Ego ultimately derives from bodily sensations, particularly sensations springing from the surface of the body.” Within this framework we understand the disastrous outcome in terms of personality in the experiments carried out by the C.I.A. during the Cold War at Montreal’s McGill University, reported by Mark Benjamin (“Salon”, 7/6/2007), experiments that inspired the 1963 British film “The Mind Benders” directed by Basil Dearden and starring Dirk Bogarde. These experiments called for individuals to be immersed in tanks full of water wearing a wet suit and equipped with a breathing tube, and with a mask over the face. In addition, the floating body cannot touch any surface. After a few hours, the individual shifted from alternating phases of hallucinatory states to the complete surrender of his psychic and moral persona to his tormentor. Hypothesizing a society of individuals devoid of Ego, in whom in a Freudian sense there rules only an Id driven by the principle of Pleasure, we might imagine individuals disgusted or averse to any physical and sensorial contact with the outside, on pain of the trauma of the invasion of the other in a solipsistic existence of this kind. Such an individual would be like a child who interprets reality according to the degree of pleasure he gets out of it. But, since he would not have sublimable objects, this pleasure could only come about in two ways: an unbridled violence against the world that must satisfy the libido or itself become the source and object of the drive: “with many guilts but pure”. In order to avoid reality breaking in to check the libido with sublimable objects, the individual-child has only one possibility: to destroy the Ego and substitute the principle of reality with that of the fable, in accordance with the act of faith cried out by Freddie in Jeannie’s parlour: “I believe in Aesop’s fables and Walt Disney”. This would be the realm of unstoppable motion, and not of the individual on the world, but of the conveyor belt beneath the individual. A world that has put Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man in a fitness centre and has forced him to jump, opening and closing arms and legs alternatively, as in the classic gymnastic exercise we were all taught since childhood. In John Cassavetes’ two specular films, “Faces” and “Love Streams”, 1984, the stairway that leads to the bedrooms is the symbol of constant movement that does not permit coming close, in which the individual cannot relate to or

construct. In fact in both films the couples meet on the stairs going up and coming down aimlessly, to the point that in "Love Streams" it is precisely on the stairs that Robert-Cassavetes tells his sister Sarah-Gena Rowlands to speak, but without stopping. Without Ego, this imaginary society would also lose another basic function, the one, still according to Freud, of verbal representations suited to transforming internal thought processes into perceptions. In this sense it is interesting that the Latin etymology of the word "alter" (other) is "ultra", "beyond". A beyond that can be understood as beyond me, hence distinct from me, but also superior to me, or an inscrutable and mysterious place, the Void that the other is for me, the Vortex, the non-place sublimated in the object and not reflected in the subject. To leap from Sigmund Freud to Slavoj Zizek, while according to Freud external reality shapes the Ego, the result is not, according to Zizek, in his book "The Absolute Fragile", the duality between a true Ego and an Ego for the others " 'beneath my social mask'" that would force me "to do things I would never be able to accomplish 'from within myself'". For Zizek, rather, the other, external reality could be an object that "is the paradoxical stand-in of the Void of subjectivity; it 'is' the subject itself in its otherness". In this necessity of the other, the Ego not only defines itself but can glimpse how much of itself is not yet, the Void, the possible. In chapter 4 of "The Fragile Absolute", whose title is "From tragique to moque-comique", Zizek quotes Marx's Manifesto, according to whom, in Capitalism "all that is solid melts to air", "solid" meaning not only material objects, but also, Zizek writes, "the stability of the symbolic order that provides a definitive identification for subjects". And, presuming, as the Slovenian philosopher continues, that "The main production of the modern and postmodern capitalist is waste", this waste cannot possess the qualities of the object, of the objectual, it is a self-service, a self-digesting apparatus, in which we ourselves are made the objects of our drives. In the realm of Capital, the one pulling Pinocchio's strings is another puppet, that is to say itself, the self, the reflexive version of the accusative "me", which implies on the contrary an Ego that is the recipient of an external action. This involves the literal reduction of metaphorical language and the misunderstanding of the literal, emptied of meaning except for the visible, in which Mickey Mouse is not an imaginary mouse that pretends to be a man, but a real mouse that talks. This is what happens to Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, who is not represented by the painting, but *is* the painting. When Jeannie, in "Faces", the morning after having made love with Jack, brings him eggs for breakfast and advises him to eat them hot, this causes Jack' to stiffen as he says: "What does that mean?" because he doesn't understand if the language is literal or if the woman means something else. It is the reason why the joke has now replaced irony, because the joke reduces everything to the signifier (we laugh at what we see and a pie in the face is no more than a pie in the face), irony plays on shifting the signified to the signifier (we laugh at what we don't see and associate a new signified to the same signifier or vice-versa). But in order to play with the signified there must exist the realm of symbol, what Zizek defines as "the Name-of-the-Father, the castrating agency that enables the subject's entry into the symbolic order, and this into the domain of *desire*". This Law, still following Zizek's stringent consequentiality, is today replaced by that of Capital, a superego that is no longer stable and immutable, but changeable and perishable, not to be known but swallowed. The drive is resolved in and on itself, and desire is guilty of delaying or deferring immediate satisfaction. If the Father can no longer be destroyed it is because he has lost the authority that made his elimination necessary, and because guilt in the realm of immediate satisfaction is no longer such if it causes pleasure. This is why Dorian Gray, deprived of the chance to be judged (he knows he has been acquitted by his cunning and by a society of a legalistic stamp), succumbs to the impossibility of expiation and redemption, and can only kill himself. The painting, the moral superego, remains with a deformed

grimace, because Orestes without Agamemnon becomes a puppet out of control. It is the pantomime in which the symptom makes itself Law, the person under analysis analyses himself and hence is not cured since the method – self-regenerating consumption - becomes the objective. Here emerges the difference between the worlds of two tragedians of the cinema, Bergman and Cassavetes, and their affinity in the common search for identity, an Ingmar Bergman quoted, with Fellini, in the beginning of “Faces”. In two of Bergman’s films, “The Magician” (1958) and “Persona” (1966), works where the two different leading characters have the same name (Vogler), the play is all on the mute protagonists who seek their own identity in the features of another. In “Persona” the actress Elizabeth Vogler-Liv Ullman expiates in silence her guilt for having hated her son, seeking a cure by imposing her persona on the young and eroticized Alma-Bibi Andersson, whose superego she is. In Cassavetes’ specular film, “Opening Night” (1977) the leading lady, the actress Myrtle Gordon-Gena Rowlands also has a young alter ego but, unlike Bergman’s Elizabeth, she is a prey to guilt feelings because of a death for which she is not responsible, a young fan run over by a car. In “Opening Night” the effectiveness of guilt is irrelevant because what forms the identity here is the pathology that triggers the fantasy of the trauma in order to bolster up the woman’s Ego. Therefore it is not fantasy that creates the pathology, but the opposite: the pathology tries desperately to re-establish the dark realm of desire through fantasy. In fact, Myrtle, as in “The Magician”, does not consult a psychologist, but a medium, from whom she can recreate the lost world, that of desire, the inexplicable, the Void, and “In The Name-of-the-Father” that can only transform the sense of guilt into awareness of guilt, public confession into individual redemption, the demarcation between me and the other. This demarcation is absolute in Miroslav Tichý’s photos, in which the photographer, like the main character in Bergman’s “Persona”, decides to keep silent, to disappear, to allow the other to be such, independent of a spectator’s gaze; he leaves the other a prey to chaos, a prey to reality. Tichý’s women are wholly erotic like Bergman’s young Alma, observed and therefore other, and never fetishes because they are left free by the reflexive and bulimic relationship with the Ego that wishes to swallow the other and make it an edible object to be swallowed in its turn. In “Opening Night” this demarcation is not present, because Myrtle, like Freddie, puts her trust in fable. The face of the ghost of the young girl is never visible, and Myrtle hits herself to lend body to a misdeed she has not committed and to invoke, as Žižek might perhaps point to, the Law of the Father to re-establish the principle of reality. The silence of Bergman’s leading characters in “The Magician” and “Persona” and their seriousness, feared by the characters in “Faces”, corresponds to that of the Commendatore in Mozart’s “Don Giovanni”, where the face of immanence is the face of the Father. In “Shadows”, a film by Cassavetes shot in 1959, “Ben” - played by Ben Carruthers according to a custom frequent in Cassavetes and Bergman (and in Fellini’s “Marcello” in “La dolce vita”) to play with the identity of the name of the actor-character – looks fearfully at a sculpture, an African-type face mask in the garden of the Metropolitan Museum in which he sees that paternal-identity he lacks because he is a half-caste. And so, in Schütte’s work, his masks and giants remain austere and unapproachable, and his grimaces are never symptom but tension, a scornful rejection of the human “minor es”, a refusal to lend themselves to the interpretation and consumption of mortals. It is the figure of the Father in Mozart’s work who, in order to remain such in the eyes of his derisive son, has only one chance: to scorn his son, remain indecipherable to him, as in the alienating and not alienated, never psychological, expression of Schütte’s statues, or like Ugo Rondinone’s sleeping clown, tragic and not comical, because by not fulfilling his function, to make people laugh by laughing, returns the blame to those who have laughed at him. It is also Robert, the failed father played by Cassavetes in “Love Streams”, who falls to his knees before his

son and clings to him, but still rebuking him, in order to remain a father. And his son will recognize him as such in a heart-rending scene, when Robert, drunk, is thrown to the ground by the husband of the boy's mother and the boy cries out "It's my father!" Contrariwise, in what Žižek calls the "administered world" of late capitalism, the new superego does not admonish, but promises "happiness, peace, youth, laughter, dances, festivals of song – and birds' milk too – so much, you'll find yourself worn out with our fine gifts- yes, that's how rich you will be" as the chorus announces in Aristophanes' "The Birds" in Karolos Koun's paradoxical version of 1962, which now seems quasi realist, in which man renounces the gods to become a bird.

In the play it is Hercules who betrays his father Zeus, Hercules the half-caste son, half man half god, who permits the man-bird – the modern Icarus who instead of falling from above to equal the gods, hops about from below to pull down their underpants – to reduce the gods to starvation because his father Zeus has not introduced him to his kin group yet, and hence for fear that his sister Athena might steal his inheritance. And the favourite law of the man-bird is that enunciated by Pisthetaerus: "to choke my father, get all his stuff". Yet, letting ourselves be guided by the stages of Slavoj Žižek's thinking, if a man jumps from one object to the other, if from one question he moves on to another without waiting for the answer, it's not so much to fill the horror vacui, but to find it again, that is, to rediscover in the water tank devoid of perceptions with the outside, which has reduced living to a soundproofed cry, that non-place where he can at least project – if not postulate – the object. In fact, for Žižek, trash art is the last desperate attempt to put "the Thing as the Void-Place-Frame, without the illusion that this Void is sustained by some hidden incestuous object.". It is in this key that we can interpret two significant lines in Ryan Trecartin's video "Sibling topics – Section a": "When I know something it disappears" or "I don't want a body anymore, I want a soul" uttered by his Self-Ceader, the character played by Trecartin himself (i.e., the artist plays the character or vice-versa) and so saying he disappears, recreating the non-place, the Void necessary for existence. But, nothing can be reflected on these surfaces as happened on those of the Ego: mirrors do not return the image of those who pass in front of them, as in "Faces", and this is Trecartin's hallucination: the body no longer guarantees existence. That is, paradoxically, living under drive makes us disappear as bodies, too: Zeus without Hercules says nothing but remains Zeus, Hercules without Zeus is a blusterer because Hercules is himself in Zeus' name, and without Zeus, he loses his name, his *raison d'être*, his uniqueness, becoming a perishable object, a lion skin, a parade costume, a helpless signifier. In this sense, Ceader's constant use of scissors in "Sibling topics - section a", while, upon first interpretation, reminds one of the anguish of eviration, or self-harming as a means of rediscovering perception, this also becomes a tribal dance to restore the symbolic value of the object, to transform hope into prophecy. The search for the non-place also lies at the base of Margherita Manzelli's pictures. The women's faces are also indecipherable and silent, they make an effort to be face-on in every painting to make themselves icons, to fix themselves in an immutable expression on the surrounding oneiric environment that is the Byzantine Void of the Idea, the Vortex that must remain obscure, that Void that in anorexia is the ultimate and greatest desire with which to invest oneself. By opposition, Lisa Yuskavage's women are only formally sensual, in the repetition of poses worn out by their reproducibility, romantic calendar-type poses devoid of sensuality because devoid of desire and desirability, masks in fade-out, inconsistent beings set adrift. This is the carcass of the Ego that has become in Lucas Samaras' video, "Self" literally a drug-sweet to be dissolved in the stomach. "I can't retain it" exclaims Harry in "Sibling topics – section a". This is echoed by Jack, in "Faces": "after what I saw on television, I'm not

ashamed of any of our routines.” So Medea, in a universe that is incontinent because self-referential, must no longer devour her children to punish her father-husband, become Gag rather than Law, but herself. In this limbo of mute and astonished gods we find Ilias Papailiakis’ quasi photographic detritus: they are the hungry gods of Aristophanes’ bird-man, Zeus devoid of divine arbitrariness, fooled by Prometheus, and Homer supplanted by Aesop and Walt Disney, who in fiction and anthropomorphism founded the gratifying modern superego. From this perspective, False Memory Syndrome goes from pathology to become methodology. It has never been certain if the rape described in Beckett’s monologue “Not I” is true. It seems that Beckett was inspired by the mutterings of a homeless old lady who the author saw in Kilcoole. What is paradoxical, however, is that the trauma is true or invented is unimportant, because reality is no longer important, but the Real, that which could be true, or plausible, in the context of a reflection, of fiction. The expression “Not I”, in the absence of a verb, might be true, that’s to say “It wasn’t me” (a case of False Memory Syndrome, in other words) or false, the “it wasn’t me” of the child who was there but doesn’t want to say so (a displacement of the trauma effectively undergone). In both cases what counts is not the sin committed or the violence experienced, but the elaborative process, the motion, projected on myself as if on a cinema screen, the contemporary version of the mirror, on which modern man, the ghost, no longer reflects his image. In this the disguises of Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun do not so much express the search to be other than myself, but to take possession of the other to make him become myself and to make myself become another. The other coincides with the Self. And while in Cahun the other is a character, [in Sherman it is the return to play, the childlike masquerade in which diverse costumes or attributes are superimposed without troubling to disguise oneself too much. On the contrary, its knowing allusiveness is intended to reveal the deception, and the photographic surface becomes an immense Disney playground.](#) As in Sherman and Cahun, in Bergman’s “The Magician”, the main character, the impostor disguised as Dr Vogler (a stupendous Max Von Sydow) opts for a camouflage that is willingly and easily recognizable, that’s to say to respond to the audience’s need of a childish staging, a fictional context. With the aid of his assistant, his wife, played by Ingrid Thulin, disguised in her turn as a boy, he persuades the Prefect’s wife to confess to her husband’s worst vulgarities and does this, as Jean-Martin Charcot did, by means of a magic lantern, what today could be the camera of a reality show. The Prefect’s wife reveals, similar to Wikileaks, the profane without the sacred, and so puts her husband in the stocks in a puerile manner, recounting indecencies while keeping quiet about his sins because the exposure to ridicule and the exhibition of excrement, means used in in child play and in contemporary art, exempt one from blame and responsibility, thereby transforming the tragic into moque-comique.

Samuel Beckett wrote his first play in 1931, in French, together with Georges Pelorson. It was titled “The Kid”, and it was a parody of Corneille’s “Le Cid”, in which Becket himself played Don Diègue. It was never published. Perhaps, otherwise, we might have interpreted the author’s personality in another way. Perhaps, in its partiality, reality is more obscure than pathology, but precisely for this reason it is better suited than the fable to have us rediscover, in the lost Void, our existence.

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