

I Said to Myself, Who Else?

Do we really watch movies anymore? We watch some, but in our imaginations we have a much larger archive made up of a fragmentary combination of trailers, reviews, culture slots on radio chat shows and social media chatter. We each acquire an internalised archive, our personal cinematic imaginary made up of films we ought to have seen, films we want to see and films we think we have seen, but never did. In this way contemporary cinema is more like a collective, social imaginary with its own plots, characters and inner landscapes quite independent of cinematography.

In the case of **e.gress** it was precisely these traces of the discursive, extra-cinematic life of a film that I was asked to consider. As a film on tour [1], **e.gress** has accumulated its own distinct archival traces. Those traces include the cinematic in the form of a promo piece, filmed interviews and selected footage of public discussions. They are textual, in the form of the catalogue essay, dance responses, poetic responses to the film and written reflections gleaned from commentaries in the visitor's books. There's also an audio trail comprised of selected recordings of post-viewing discussions and radio interviews. I was invited to engage with those archival fragments of a live tour, to consider them as a particular semiotic flow and to somehow (re)assemble them according to my own cartographic principles. It was an invitation extended with great artistic creative license and, as a late arriver to the **e.gress** journey, I was keen to honour the considered duty of care that had already attended this post-production, public phase.

It was with this idea of the inner archive of the unseen film in mind that I at first, however briefly, entertained the notion of not seeing **e.gress**. Instead, I considered engaging with it through the lens of its discursive archival traces at one remove from the thing itself. In the end I thought better but as a thought experiment it helped me to understand that the unseen film shares the same fate as the unread book: a film is the combination of spectacle and its discursive traces.

In the first instance this process has called for an immersion in the semiotic flow of these archival traces. In doing so, it is immediately clear that **e.gress** has functioned as a sort of displacement object, something in the order of a diversionary tactic for producing a public discourse on a difficult subject. If taboo by definition inhabits the domain of the unannouncable, then we need a displacement object, not so much to 'talk around it', but to find ways of bringing it into the domain of the sayable. The artist herself is well aware of those discursive possibilities:

In a lot of my work it's really important, the sense of almost shining a light on something that's not really spoken about, that's still quite shunned, that people are a little embarrassed to speak about. There's a little bit of stigma still. Perhaps in an artwork it's a safe space to consider some of the things that might be difficult to talk about. An art work provides a space for that kind of new thinking perhaps. **Marie Brett**, [2]

What have I encountered? Without getting lost in any forensic treatment, for those of us with some flying time in social practice there are many familiar lines of critical egress and some surprises. It is in any case a rich semiotic pond to draw from with a diversity of perspectives which cumulatively bear witness to a forensic duty of care to the public phase of the project.

It has been a tour as a series of detours. Certain strands can be anticipated. There is of course an exploration of ethics of encounter. The role of the gatekeepers is considered: I mean this in a positive sense. They are vital in both their generosity and their caution, skillfully mediating the encounter between artists, the carers, the families and the cared for. On establishing those relations of trust the artist is refreshingly candid:

The staff were amazing and really supportive. Amazingly several families did open their door to us. I think they trusted us and they got a sense of our integrity, if I'm honest, matched with the staff's trust **Marie Brett**, [3]

There are questions of representation, a move from the more biographic turn of earlier work towards a more opaque, opened treatment. The aesthetic dimension is considered in tandem with the function of art as the discursive device, a tool for thinking. The affective domain is explored both at the level of the reception of the artwork and at the level of the lived experience of families and carers.

As an artwork **e.gress** has gathered these fragmented traces of a temporary discursive community, this data set. I will not attempt any formal sociological analysis here that would ascribe to each thematic line its proper weight according to the procedures of qualitative review. Instead, I will swerve from that hermeneutic mountain to consider the unconscious of **e.gress**, or at least the subterranean ground through which it has established its symbolic force. In short, I will try to speak to the ground of memory, self and identity.

Through my immersion in the discursive stream of **e.gress** I have come to understand it as a conjectural rather than an instructional proposition. In that conjectural mode, it raises some universal questions about self and ontology selfhood. In its ambition to evoke the phenomenology of clinical forgetting it seems to question the very notion of a stable, coherent and continuous self.

The filmic treatment immediately challenges the clinical gaze that might reduce human becoming to the domain of pathology. The notion of a more ancient, universal self is introduced explicitly by one of the contributors to a post-screening discussion, albeit to rescue the idea of an essence:

We have our own rules for how we should be. They're pertaining to now. They were very different 500 years ago or 1000 years before that again. I always think in those spaces you actually start to see just the essence, the essential self, that actually is immortal. It's the piece that has always been and I think you get a little hint. **Maria Mulligan** [4]

While that glimpse of an essential self, a bedrock of identity is hinted at here, in other readings it disappears, giving way to a more fragmented and unstable self, one that brings us closer to the abyss of subjectivity:

Egress, by positioning the experience of dementia and the loss of memory in the way that it does, brings about a powerful and unsettling way of thinking about time, place and identity, where the notion of a stable reality and a single self, breaks apart'. **Ann Davoran**, [5]

This ambiguity between essence and fragmentation is captured hauntingly by the mirror scene towards the close of **e.gress**. We see a woman in dialogue with her own reflected image. It is the authority and precision of this auto-diagnostic moment that so powerfully interrupts and refuses any purely clinical reading of the scene, any reduction to the order of symptoms. On the contrary, her self-diagnosis has such pragmatic and poetic force that it asserts itself over any external, clinical gaze. Somehow, along with the steely gazes of other figures in the film who meet the camera unflinchingly, the woman sorting identities between self and reflection has a distinct authority, an agency of her own.

Certainly in her choice of the mirror as a site of self-encounter it is hard to resist invoking the idea of a symbolic return to Jacques Lacan's famous mirror stage. Such a return is invoked explicitly during the post-viewing discussion in Limerick City Gallery:

I'll just reference a final moment, that's the mirror moment as I call it. This figure has an animated conversation with her own reflection. For me that was just so poignant because I was reminded of Lacan and the psychanalytic moment of the mirror stage where the infant typically at 6 months starts to recognise itself in the mirror. There's just this sort of inevitable cycle the moment you first recognise yourself, but when is the moment you last recognize yourself? Tracy Fahey, [6]

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Doubtless this is a return with a pathos. Lacan has us forever in a state of recovery from the realisation that we are not co-extensive with the world. The mirror scene confronts us with the moment of a different ontological break: the between self and the apprehension of self.

For the moment let's be done with the clinical gaze. And let's suspend the pathos of that Lacanian return of the mirror stage. Instead, I will turn to a different mirror, one that shows up in a film by Samuel Beckett called *Film* [7]. If the figures of **e.gress** face the camera with an unflinching defiance, it is the sole objective of Beckett's leading man, played by Buster Keaton, to avoid its gaze. In the opening scene we see him making his way along a wall with back to camera. He ascends a stairs with the visible side of the face obscured by a cloth. He enters a room where all his movements are dictated by avoiding the line of sight of the camera. A mirror is identified as an immediate visibility risk. He covers it with a drape. At the risk of spoiling the plot, it's the camera that eventually undoes him.

While the figures depicted in **e.gress** have a very different relation to the camera, the woman's self-interrogation at the mirror is resonant with the existential

sparseness of Beckett's essential question: *I said to myself, who else?* It is no doubt a great audacity to even suggest an essential question for Beckett but I do have some grounds, if not scholarly, for proposing it. Many years ago I had occasion to watch all of Beckett's dramatic work on film over a two-weeks period [8]. In the course of this condensed cinematic encounter I became aware of certain recurring phrases punctuating the work. And most persistent among them: *I said to myself, who else?*

Perhaps it is this persistence of the 'I', the unrelenting inner dialogue that endures despite all, that's at the heart of Beckett's tragi-comic characters. Is this not precisely the dilemma of the woman in the mirror scene? At last a self-interruption, a self-interrupted.

And here finally, we have arrived at the point of ideology: isn't it that unified self, as opposed to the fragmented self, that has been lost to us now? Has not *get your self together* become the quasi-spiritual imperative of the times we live in? At the same time, it is this unified, ontologically self-contained, atomized self that constitutes the ultimate ideological category. Surely the encounter between self and other is never an encounter between structurally closed, coherent selves. Isn't inter-subjectivity, as Hegel has suggested, always a risky brush with the abyss of subjectivity?

Maybe I speak for myself when I defend the existential validity of fragmentation. I am in favour of an ontology of fragmentation over the rational, consuming self. I am happy to leave the production of this rational, productive self and its techniques of self-optimising to the psychologists and their regimes of self-governance (*no more of that*). Rather like Gilles Deleuze's description of an artwork, I prefer a selfhood that does not depend on a single author, a more collective art of self-production:

Art is defined, then, as an impersonal process in which the work is composed somewhat like a *cairn*, with stones carried in by different voyagers and beings in becoming, (rather than ghosts) that may or may not depend on a single author'.
Gilles Deleuze, [9]

I would rather join these ghosts who are not ghosts. But let's be clear. There is no intention to elevate the existential catastrophe of clinical forgetting to the status of any demonstrative philosophical condition. Far from it. I am instead embracing the invitation which **e.gress** has extended, as I have come to understand it, to consider the relationship between memory and self, between the narration of self and the loss of self. In all of this let us not forget that the production of self is a profoundly social affair. We exist in language, in a network of conversations. Furthermore, we sustain ourselves in the memories, the traces, the matrix of social narratives through which we are (re)membered. This bracketed (re)membered is employed deliberately here to make its double meaning explicit. Certainly remembering functions at the level of recollection. It is also implied in the sense of remembering as the process of recovery into human community through narrative rescue (*do you remember that time when*

....). This a social remembering, the process of recovering your place as a member of that community, your place in the network of conversations.

This collective mnemonic labour is an extra-clinical form of treatment. Certainly doctors treat patients. For filmmakers treatment is something else. They think of treatment according to stylistic forms of cinematic presentation. In filmic terms, **e.gress** has deployed a layered visual and acoustic treatment that, without telling us what to think **of** feel, has re-inserted clinical forgetting into the church of human experience.

Ciaran Smyth, Vagabond Reviews

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Notes

1. Following the launch at IMMA in November 2015 E.gress toured at Alzheimer's Society of Ireland Centre, Cork: The Model, Sligo: Alzheimer's Society of Ireland Centre, Waterford: 69 OCS Arts and Culture Centre, Limerick: Butler Gallery, Kilkenny: Nun's Island, Galway.
2. Ocean FM Radio Interview.
3. Post-viewing discussion, The Model Sligo.
4. *ibid.*
5. Post-viewing response at Cork Alzheimer's Society. [Society](#)
6. Post-viewing discussion, [Belltable/69 OCS Arts and Culture Centre](#), Limerick.
7. *Film*, (1965), Director, Alan Schneider.
8. The series was *Beckett On Film*, (2001): a project initiated by Michael Colgan, Gate Theatre produced for RTE, Channel 4 and the Irish Film Board.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *What Children Say*, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 1997, p66.

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