BRILL

From Face to *Facies*

Recognition and Machine Vision in Beckett and Agamben

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Abstract

This article considers Beckett's faces in the light of Giorgio Agamben's account of the face as a disputed biopolitical marker. Agamben refers to the face both in terms of social and juridical identity in ancient Rome and as an icon of contemporary biopolitics, as social identity gives way to biometric recognition. Beckett's own face figures prominently in the series of machine-generated Eigenface portraits created by artist Trevor Paglen in 2017, and whose use of the Eigenface method invokes modern facial recognition technologies. The Eigenface is examined here in relation to a gallery of ghostly progenitors: the faces of Beckett's late plays.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur les visages de Samuel Beckett en tenant compte de l'analyse de Giorgio Agamben du visage en tant que vecteur du biopolitique. Le visage, chez Agamben, se réfère aux identités sociales et juridiques dans la Rome antique, ainsi qu'à la biopolitique à l'époque actuelle, où l'identité sociale cède à l'identification biométrique. Le visage de Beckett lui-même prend sa place dans la série de portraits créée par l'artiste Trevor Paglen en 2017, dont la méthode 'Eigenface' signale la reconnaissance faciale technologique. Nous examinons l'Eigenface dans le contexte d'une galerie de progéniteurs spectraux: celle des visages des dernières pièces de Beckett.

In his 2009 essay "Identity Without the Person," Giorgio Agamben elaborates on the role of the face in the social construction of the 'person': "it is only through recognition by others that man can constitute himself as a person," he comments. Agamben, as a thinker of the biopolitics of the face, exemplifies the trajectory traced out in this essay from the expressive face to the biometric face, and from the face as a marker of social identity and towards the biometric face as a "function of biological data" (Agamben 2011, 50) in the years following Beckett's death. That trajectory, too, can be seen in the ghostly faces of Beckett's late plays, which serve as uncanny progenitors to a series of images created in 2017 by the artist and photographer Trevor Paglen, one of which, as we shall see, remediates Beckett's own face via computer vision.

In ancient Rome, Agamben argues, social recognition centres on the ancestral wax mask, or 'persona,' kept in the atrium of the family home:

> *Persona* originally means 'mask,' and it is through the mask that the individual acquires a role and a social identity. In Rome every individual was identified by a name that expressed his belonging to a *gens*, to a lineage; but this lineage was defined in turn by the ancestor's mask of wax that every patrician family kept in the atrium of its home. From here, it only takes a small step to transform *persona* into the 'personality' that defines the place of the individual in the dramas and rituals of social life.
>
> AGAMBEN 2011, 46

The patrician's struggle for recognition, Agamben pursues, is "the struggle for a mask," for the social recognition of the persona which the slave can never enjoy, having neither mask nor name. *Persona*, as Agamben notes, came to signify political dignity and "juridical capacity" (46). Later in the essay, meanwhile, Agamben considers the "decisive transformation of the concept of identity" which results from the developments in the nineteenth century which ensure "another type of recognition: that of the recidivist criminal by the police offi-

cer" (48). This is the system of criminal identification which became known as *Bertillonage*, underpinned by Alphonse Bertillon's archival practices and photographic method, in which anthropometric measurements and mug shots were combined to provide a *portrait parlé*: a quick yet comprehensive snapshot of a suspect which could be read off a single index card. Social recognition gives way here to the reconstitution of the subject as the object of a disciplinary apparatus: recognition now acquires the police meaning derived from the identification of the criminal individual, and is increasingly aligned with the contemporary processes of "biometric and biological identification" (51) that Agamben considers in the last part of "Identity Without the Person." The "object of recognition" (53), as Agamben suggests, is no longer the person, but the biometric persona; individuals are identified by machines, and identity is redefined in terms of juridical subjection rather than juridical capacity. This is the era in which Paglen constructs his machine-oriented portraits of Beckett, Eigenface images shaped by biometric recognition processes.

In this context, the idea of the *portrait parlé*, or speaking portrait, sheds light on the way different forms of recognition inform Beckett's faces. Facial recognition, for Agamben, is one of the forms of the "Great Machine" (53) by which individuals are recognised and classified and which, I suggest, Beckett's work anticipates in a number of ways. The idea of the *portrait parlé* addresses Beckett's liminal faces, from the talking heads of the later drama to *Film*. In *Eh Joe*, the relation between Joe and the unseen speaker culminates in a close-up of the face; as Joe is held to account by the voice for his treatment of women, the voice becomes, in Trish McTighe's analysis, a "tactile force carving guilt into the image of Joe's face," and the face is made into a material for inscription (McTighe 2012, 219). Joe's face is marked as "practically motionless throughout" and "impassive except in so far as it reflects mounting tension of *listening*": expression and affect are implied, rather than disclosed, and yet the inscrutable tension of the face is a key constituent of the drama (Beckett 1990, 362).

This, then, is an instance of the face as what Eckart Voigts-Virchow calls the "residual locus of expressiveness" in Beckett (Voigts-Virchow 2000, 131), both a minimally expressive agent and a marker of the fear of being seen. The latter element is announced in the opening of *Eh Joe*, in the disingenuous claim "No one can see you now," and coupled with the fear "there might be a louse watching you"; "why don't you put out that light?" (362), so that the spectator's apprehension of Joe's face enacts the optical surveillance which he so dreads. This is the central drama of *Film*, too, in which "O," played by Buster Keaton, is in flight from "E," which turns out to be the camera eye itself: "the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit. It will not be clear until end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous,

but self" (Beckett 1990, 323). O avoids being seen (confronting E's interlocking gaze) until the very end of the film, when the full-face moment of recognition at last takes place, triggering first an inscrutable expression ("impossible to describe, neither severity or benignity, but rather acute *intentness*" (329)) and then a movement of avoidance, as O sits with his head in his hands. The social persona is terrifying but inescapable, as flight endlessly relapses into the "inescapability of self-perception." In all of these works, the face is imagined as an object to be concealed from the surveillant eye, which plays over its planar form. It is to this aspect, and to its resonances with the role of the Eigenface in facial recognition, that I now turn.

1   Beckett and Machine Vision: The Eigenface

The Eigenface is the visualisation tool underpinning the portrait of Beckett I consider in the second part of this essay: Trevor Paglen's *Beckett* (*Even the Dead Are Not Safe*) (2017) [figure 1]. The photograph, a frontal, colour composite, draws upon the Eigenface method, in which common features of multiple faces are projected onto a 'feature space' so that they can be compared and individual faces recognised. In Paglen's work, though, the Eigenface is appropriated as a means of visual production, taking the features common to all images of Beckett as the basis of a new image. The resulting facial image is blurred, achieving a 'levelling' of the features of all of the Beckett images in the repertoire, and giving the impression of a face which is always just out of focus. There is a parallel here with the faces of Beckett's television plays which, as in *Nacht und Träume*, slowly come into focus out of the darkness; here, by contrast, the image is bright but blurred, as though receding into an inscrutable background.

The Eigenface represents a significant milestone in the biometric history charted by Agamben, marking the advent of functional facial recognition technologies in the 1980s and 1990s. Beckett's faces, meanwhile, highlight an engagement with technology which may shed further light on Paglen's Eigenface project, and ultimately on the biometric constructions of identity to which Agamben refers. In Beckett's work, vision is often beset by the vagaries and limitations of the human body: the idea of the "eye of flesh" is deployed in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *The Lost Ones* in order to highlight the failure of the human eye to pick out distinctions which *could* be observed but are not (Beckett 1981, 30; 1979, 70). *Long Observation of the Ray*, meanwhile, evokes a machinic process apparently quite separate from human frailties. The text describes the progress of a ray of light over a spherical chamber but the ray is never conclusively rooted
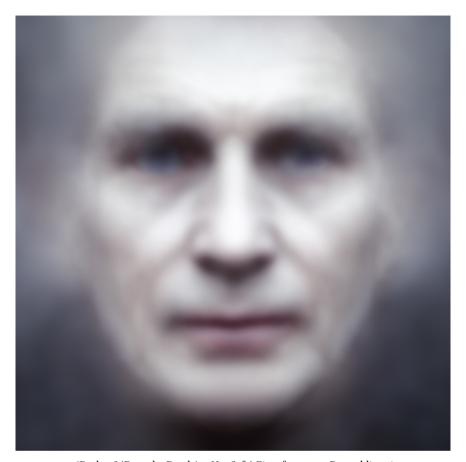
FIGURE 1   "Beckett" (Even the Dead Are Not Safe) Eigenface, 2017. Dye sublimation on
aluminium print. 48×48 in.
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in a human observer: "hermetic inasmuch as no trace of inlet and / or outlet
has appeared" (Beckett 1975–1976). In contrast to the vulnerability of human
sight to light conditions, age and disease, *Long Observation* offers a glimpse of
Beckettian machine vision: "occasional extinction or more likely occultation
accompanied by faint sound" (Beckett 1975–1976). This is what seeing might
be, freed of the constraints of the body which are so ruthlessly dramatised else-
where.

The idea of machine vision nonetheless exists as a potential in a number of
other works, many of which stage an important encounter between technol-
ogy and the face. *Quad*, in which the face is invisible, promises a mathemati-
cal translation of all the possible movements across a defined space, and has

notable similarities with a set of programming instructions, like an algorithm (see Jones 2023). Here, though, I consider the tendency in other works towards frontal focus, as well as the creation of arrays of similar faces and the denaturalisation of the face in favour of a mathematical capturing of its features. All of these aspects point to a strand of Beckett's thinking on the face which is profoundly influenced by its technological mediation, and which has specific implications for thinking about facial recognition and Paglen's Eigenfaces. The frontal gaze is the one which O fears in *Film*, and his frantic quest to remain within the oblique "angle of immunity" (324) becomes the central drama of the scenario. Although there are no specific indications as to the viewing angle, the face is usually presented frontally in *That Time*, too, and the mouth must be seen from the front for the spotlight presentation to work in *Not I*.

What Where, meanwhile, sees what is perhaps Beckett's most sustained technological engagement with the face, an engagement which I shall discuss in relation to 'machine vision' here, both in the technical sense and in the more figurative understanding of the term suggested by the details of the work. The adaptations of *What Where* as a television play foreground a number of issues seen in computer facial recognition, including viewing angle and rotation, lighting and colour, and herald a move away from the messy, affect-ridden human interpretation of faces and towards a vision of the face as an informational entity. The original TV version, *Was Wo*, was broadcast by Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Germany in 1986, while a much later version was made by Walter Asmus (who worked closely with Beckett on the original adaptation) in 2013.

The version made as part of the *Beckett on Film* project and directed by Damien O'Donnell in 2001 is something of an outlier: it is more like a filmed version of the stage play than the 1986 and 2013 films, and much less preoccupied with the face as a visual object. The most striking engagement with technology is the situation of the drama in a high-tech archive, suggesting that the characters are themselves part of an infernal surveillance apparatus. The chief innovation of the production lies in this architectural rendering of authoritarian scrutiny, as each character is interrogated on the details of the interrogation which they have themselves previously carried out. At the play's opening, Bom is thus interrogated by Bam: "he didn't say anything?" (472). Despite having given the prisoner "the works," Bom has discovered 'nothing.' Bam, however, refuses to believe Bom's account, concluding "He said it to you. [*Pause*]. Confess he said it to you" (472). The cycle of interrogation and violence is perpetuated as Bam instructs Bim to question Bom, announcing to Bom "You'll be given the works until you confess" (472). The off-stage space of torture and questioning is thus associated with an informational or archival mechanism which the char-

acters physically inhabit, in contrast to the decontextualised faces of the other TV versions.

In the 1986 and 2013 TV versions of *What Where*, the characters are reduced to disembodied faces which periodically emerge from a black background and then fade again into darkness. The original stage directions alternately illuminate and darken the rectangular playing area ("light on"; "light off"), but the TV versions see the viewing area periodically lapse into complete darkness: "lit PA [playing area] eliminated" with "black / ground unbroken," as Beckett's production notes attest (Beckett 1999, 427). It is here too that we read the crucial stipulation for "faces only" (427) to be shown, removing the performers' bodies from the visual field and redefining the face as the locus of visual attention. The 1986 version, in which Walter Asmus collaborated closely with Beckett, heralds the watershed moment in the intermedial history of the work in which the action, in my interpretation, becomes a drama of the face. Its standpoint to mechanical facial recognition, though, is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the production pares the face down to its most basic form, making invisible many of the contextual features surrounding it: "No visible headdress / Hair etc., eliminated by / make up & invisible / black material. Only oval of / face to be seen" (431). In practical terms, the effect was achieved by cameraman Jim Lewis's creation of a home-made device through which the faces would be viewed: "I cut a small hole, an aperture, in a piece of cardboard, and placed each cardboard in front of each camera. We used four cameras at the same time, and we lined the aperture up to fit the particular face" (Fehsenfeld 1986, 237). Make-up was used, too, to soften facial contours and the actors wore hoods to conceal their hair and ears, "darkening the outline to recede into black" (276). In all of these ways the production favours and anticipates machine vision, screening out context, minimising facial expression and rendering the face as a frontally perceived oval. The only exception is the face of Bam, which not only dwarfs the others but is overlit and strays from its axis to the viewer's left at the beginning of the film. It is difficult to make a precise judgement as to the dividing line between technological limitations and aesthetic strategies: as Jonathan Bignell notes, a key distinction between the 1986 and 2013 versions concerns the cathode ray tube technology used in the original, in contrast to the LED and LCD displays in common use by 2013 (Bignell 2022, 182).

Bam's face, though, poses a series of problems for machine vision, making itself elusive in terms of mathematical mapping, and ultimately suggesting one of the self-undermining tropes so common in Beckett's work. Given the key role of Bam in the play, in which he serves as both a character and the

narrator who orchestrates the action, such a portrayal points to a technological critique: one of the many moments at which Beckett invokes technology precisely in order to elaborate a "mechanics of failure." As Dúnlaith Bird has argued, the numerous technological problems in Beckett's work paradoxically produce both breakdowns in understanding and form and the reappropriation of those breakdowns (Bird 2021, 44). Beckett's highly ambiguous use of technology, from *Krapp's Last Tape* to *What Where*, may anticipate the searching critique of technologies of surveillance in Paglen's work on "operational images," as we shall see, with its suspicion of "images made by machines for other machines" (Paglen 2014).

Many aspects of the televisual *What Where*, from the 'dehumanised' portrayal of the face to the literal and figurative elimination of 'colour,' are frequently associated with a Beckettian aesthetic (Bignell 2009, 74). I want now, though, to emphasise some of the ways in which they resonate with facial recognition too, a domain in which aesthetic considerations logically have no place. The preference for monochrome presentation, for example, is clearly deeply engrained within Beckett's work, but can also be productively linked to the fundamental problems posed by the face in computer vision.[1] As Jonathan Bignell notes, monochrome was a "deliberate and significant choice for [the] producers" of Beckett's TV dramas, despite the increasing currency of colour in television (Bignell 2022, 184). Black and white may equally provide a more efficient way of rendering the face as an object of machine vision, however. Colour and lighting can pose problems in facial recognition, as can 'tilt'; the attempt to screen out such factors in studies in facial recognition has much in common with their treatment in Beckett's play. As Sean Day-Lewis commented on the BBC production of *Ghost Trio* in 1977, as Bignell notes, "Beckett does not believe in colour television, it seems, just in case too much information is let loose" (184). The treatment of the face in *What Where*, though, is in fact very close to its apprehension *as* information: the thrust of the play is to defamiliarise the face and to demote its expressive capabilities in favour of a mathematical understanding of its spatial coordinates. This is the logic of the presentation of the characters "full face throughout" (Beckett 1999, 427) in the TV project, and of Beckett's stipulation, reported by Walter Asmus, that the "sizes of the faces" must be unified, and that the "head positions must be exactly the same, without the slightest sideways tilt," reducing the faces to standardised, planar objects (Asmus 2021, 178). The tendency is amplified in the 2013 remake, as

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1 Beckett originally envisaged colour as one of the means of differentiating between characters, but the idea was subsequently dropped. See Beckett 1999, 427.

Asmus recounts, with HD cameras and digital editing allowing a more precise rendering of the faces (185–189).[2]

Such a conception is central to automated facial recognition which, in the Eigenface method, seeks to create a set of 'eigenvectors,' or principal components of faces as they are viewed across the repertoire of images. The frontal presentation of the face allows this to be understood as an "intrinsically two-dimensional (2-D) recognition problem," and the eigenvectors can then be mathematically rendered and compared, as Matthew Turk and Alex Pentland note in a landmark study from 1991, just as facial recognition was becoming viable (Turk and Pentland 1991, 71). The Eigenfaces are thus composites, recalling Galton's earlier composite photographs, assemblages of multiple faces designed to demonstrate the "variation between face images." Turk and Pentland are at the forefront of the development of workable facial recognition systems, which increasingly find practical applications in the 1990s, notably resulting in an algorithm sold to Viisage Technology in 1996 (Gates 2011, 50). Even in the midst of this applied research, Turk and Pentland note the creation of "a sort of ghostly face we can call an *eigenface*" (73): the superimposition of multiple sets of features leads to a mask-like blurring of outlines. Even here, then, the question of how we are to read the face exceeds the purely instrumental operations required by machine vision: the Eigenface, directly recalling the faces of Beckett's television plays, acquires a ghostly aura, a residual aesthetic which cannot easily be liquidated.

2   Conclusion: *Facies*

I return, at the end of this essay, to Agamben's treatment of the face, and to the idea of the *facies*. The term is used in Agamben's essay "Identity Without the Person," in which he reflects on the biometric era in which the face is reduced to evidence as one of "both joy and horror" (Agamben 2011, 52). Agamben evokes the paradoxical promise of freedom in which we journey beyond personal identity, in search of a new "figure of the living being" (52), "for that face beyond the mask just as much as it is beyond the biometric *facies*" (54).

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2 Another ghostly echo is created in 2011 in the film *Face Scripting*, by Jane and Louise Wilson, Shumon Basar and Eyal Weizman. The film deals with the death of Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mahbouh in Dubai in 2010, which was linked to Mossad due to facial recognition technology; the deployment of partially camouflaged faces in a series of black-and-white sequences is strikingly reminiscent of the faces of *What Where*. For an analysis of the work in the context of the forensic see Jones 2022, 129–134.

The term, in contemporary usage, is current in geology, where it refers to the total range of features reflecting the conditions under which a rock formation came into being (Allaby 2020). It is not, then, the outward appearance of an entity, but an informational matrix derived from the analysis of its features, like the mathematical rendering of the face in facial recognition. Agamben's writing is preoccupied by what the face is *not*, as well as what it is: the face's biometric aspect, as it becomes the index of an individual identity, is something radically other, a repertoire of informational vectors like that to which Beckett appeals in the faces of *What Where*. Even in naming this biometric object, though, Agamben uses a term redolent of materiality, as though issuing a paradoxical injunction *not* to imagine the face's stubborn mineral quality, as in the "faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns" in *Play* (307). To understand the face in the biometric age is to move away from materiality, and towards machine vision, and yet materiality reasserts itself at every glance.

Trevor Paglen's machine-inflected portrait of Beckett serves as an apt counterpoint to this recalcitrant topos. Paglen's Beckett is always on the verge of intelligibility, promising to come into focus and yet, due to the ghostly blurring of the Eigenface, remaining forever indeterminate. Paglen's *Eigenface* series offers a stark reminder of the "documentary regime of verification" in which we live (Gates 2011, 13), and in which mechanised facial recognition came into being: facial recognition is closely linked to military and policing applications, verifying individual identities in order to maintain the security of financial transactions and to prevent crime. Beckett, in taking his place in the series, becomes part of a series of mugshots, a gallery of portraits with a police meaning. Paglen, in producing Eigenface images of figures who subverted social norms or broke the law, asks "whether the development of these [surveillance] technologies will preclude people like Simone Weil or Frantz Fanon from ever existing again" (C.R. Jones 2018). Even the dead, in this logic, are not safe: they can be posthumously processed as Eigenfaces, translated into the visual language of the surveillance society. The series ranges from iconoclastic and revolutionary thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon to Beckett and, ultimately, to Winona Ryder, whose shoplifting was literally captured on cctv in 2001.

Paglen's concerns centre on the hidden operations of power in aspects of the visual world such as these, and on the increasingly marginalised position of human seeing in that world. As automated number plate recognition systems, scanners and facial recognition systems become ever more dominant, human operators are relegated to a minor role in the visual economy. Machines, henceforth, take on a shadowy, inscrutable agency, reversing the age-old position of the human observer: "we no longer look at images—images look at

us" (Paglen 2016). Machines, then, are both prolific producers and consumers of images, endlessly sifting the faces of human agents who, like O, retreat in the face of their scrutiny. Paglen's work, in its manipulation of the Eigenface, returns the human viewer to the domain of the machine image: "for those of us still trying to see with our meat-eyes," he says, "artworks inhabiting the world of machine-seeing might not look like anything at all" (Cornell, Bryan-Wilson, and Kholeif 2018, 140). For all its dystopian overtones, such a conclusion issues a final, ambivalent appeal to the meat eye, which still has the power to look back and to reintegrate the 'operational' image within the realms of human visuality. To do so, as we have seen, is both to imagine the operations of machine vision and to invite a knowing return to human constraints, to the "filthy eye of flesh," in all its ill-seeing (Beckett 1981, 30).

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