PERSONNE:

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WHITE MAN

by CATHERINE RUSSELL

Personne
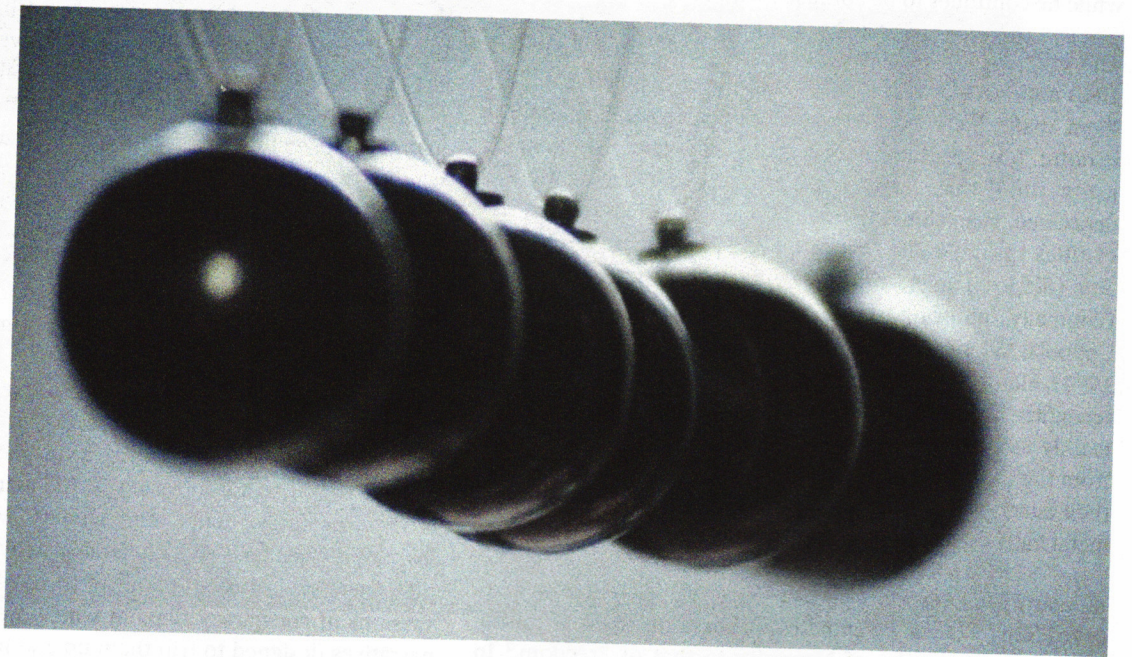Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller (2016)

Esse est percipi.

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception.

Samuel Beckett,

In 1965 Samuel Beckett made a curious film called *Film* featuring Buster Keaton as a man pursued by a camera. Beckett's schematic plan for the film maps out a game of point-of-view in which O (Keaton) plays peek-a-boo with E (the camera), but the omniscient E is never seen. In 2016 Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller made a video called *Personne* about a man who, we could say, is pursued by his own image. While Beckett's elusive "E" has the man "O" trapped and cornered in physical space, in *Personne* the man's gaze has trapped himself in a cycle of duplication that occludes his identity within a shifting, blinking, falling, crashing, and driving shuffle of film images. The subject of *the man* which may be called his *self* is successfully obliterated in the blizzard.

The man in *Personne*, usually Jean-Louis Trintignant, is always alone, thinking, waiting, looking, turning. He wears the suit-and-tie uniform of the bourgeois European he so often played in French and Italian films, and his surroundings are always quite spare: hotel rooms, hallways, cars, and elevators. Trintignant's image is embedded in a collage of objects borrowed from dozens of films: things like phones and door handles, airplanes, spilled and broken bottles and glasses, machines of various sorts, and a number of shots of a Newton's cradle, also known as an executive ball clicker. When it is activated, the suspended balls knock each other into a regulated rhythm. The 15-minute video borrows this automated casual logic for its surrealist series of puzzling images punctuated by mechanical sounds that fill the space of empty rooms.

The man himself becomes an object at times, curled like a corpse in an elevator or photographed as a dead man. Fragments of writing speak of an inconclusive self; communications are incomplete. Journeys go nowhere. "Personne" of course is no-one, and also somebody, and anyone. Sometimes the man is not Trintignant. Sometimes it is Gregory Peck and briefly Henry Fonda, along with a few other men whose names escape me but who look familiar. In the middle of the film is a black and white reproduction of Magritte's 1937 painting *La reproduction interdite*: a man sees the back of his head in a mirror, his face turned away from the viewer. Trintignant returns in shadow, or with a hand over his eyes, while doors open and close and he glances over his shoulder or he peers around a corner. He seems hunted, in danger, threatened by

a sequence of bodies and objects falling and breaking, even while he continues to be confused with other faces.

The credits of *Personne* include 144 films, made between 1943 and 2014, American and European, with the bulk of them made between 1968 and 1973. Surprisingly, only a handful feature Jean-Louis Trintignant. The list includes many films that feature white men who are confused, depressed, suspicious, ensnared, or double-crossed. The list of titles includes *The Collector* (William Wyler, 1965), *Fail Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), *The Man in a Grey Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson, 1956), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Trois couleurs: Rouge* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1994), along with dozens of lesser-known films. It is hard to recognize most of the clips because Girardet and Müller have mainly taken *inserts*: the objects that are looked at, divorced from the character looking. Point-of-view shots are torn from their narrative homes to become insert objects suspended like metal balls knocking each other into movement.

Morgan Fisher describes his use of inserts in his short archive-based film *( )* (a.k.a. *Parentheses*) as liberating them, or raising them from the realm of Necessity to that of Freedom.[2] In *Personne*, simply because there is a gaze located within the film, the objects evoke instead a world of things that threaten the man, including the accoutrements of his uniform: briefcase, jacket, tie and shoes. He sees no one and no one is seen; no women, no others. Pinned butterflies and bees make this a different collection than Fisher's, even if the two films share a profusion of mechanical devices. The man is an image of a man, an actor who plays many men, and yet he is a single man who seeks himself within the proliferation of things that haunt him. Could he be so easily replaced by Gregory Peck or Henry Fonda? Can he see himself outside the movies? These are questions any actor could ask themselves, but here it is the white male actor who is asking.

Jean-Louis Trintignant is likely more familiar to European audiences than to North Americans. He actually has a nice quirky smile that we never see in *Personne*, as the filmmakers have chosen his *resting face* as a recurring gesture. The video, following the model of clacking balls, plays with movement and stasis, so it is appropriate that the man's only expression is that of worry, doubt, and anxiety, which are distilled in that resting face—which is also a blank face. Many of the films listed in the credits are thrillers, or heist films, or versions of conspiracy films in which men are caught up in narratives designed to trip them up and fail them. The stasis of Trintignant's face, and those of his avatars, renders the man inert, like a cog in a machine.

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For Beckett, the white man is *everyman*, an existential hero who struggles within the field of perception, which is the field of audio-visual/photographic images. Fifty years later, the white man is a Caucasian male heterosexual, a type of human being who, in *Personne*, witnesses his self-erasure. Caught within the circuits of his own gaze, he manages to cancel himself out. A young Jean-Louis, behind the wheel of a car, finally turns to *see* his older self behind another wheel, driving nowhere except to mortality. The white man can no longer survive in the world of images without the recognition of another kind of human being. By using the trope of the suit-and-tie office man, Girardet and Müller have mined the archive of narrative cinema for a fragmented—but nevertheless repetitive and ritualized—image of a creature on the verge of extinction, a man who once saw himself in every film he watched.

As *archiveologists*, Girardet and Müller have sustained a practice of critical cinephilia since 1999 when they made *Phoenix Tapes*, an intricate dissection of Hitchcock's cinematic oeuvre. Their practice is at once deeply respectful of their cinephiliac topography, and also destructive.[3] The ruined masculine landscape of *Personne* is in keeping with their surgical practice of destructive criticism, retaining within its most intimate gestures a lost love for the white man's slow fade into his own uniformity.

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *Film: Complete Scenario, illustrations, production shots*, New York: Grove Press, 1969, p. 11.

2. Morgan Fisher, *Writings*. Edited by Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz, Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2012, p. 71.

3. See my longer discussion of Girardet and Müller in *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 160-183.

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