

The Swedenborg Room

Text by Pablo Sigg

“In April 1745, Emanuel Swedenborg was dining in a private room at an inn in London. By the end of the meal, Swedenborg noted that the room seemed to grow dark and shift character. He then saw a vision, an apparition. When the room cleared again Swedenborg went home to his apartment, considerably stirred by his experience.”

Had it not been for that transformed room, the mystic and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg might never have become an ardent traveler of heavens and hells, nor a “Buddha of the North,” as D. T. Suzuki baptized him. I believe that Swedenborg’s experience—which in a way physically fractured the Age of Reason, in the sense that it heralded future avatars of matter synthesized in the mystic experience of one of the most mysterious men of the Enlightenment—was perhaps, in a morbidly ironic turn of historical events, a parable of the transformed, dual, paradoxical space that the Industrial Revolution would engender a century and a half later: the space of cinema.

Swedenborg’s revelation was truly “cinematic.” In other words, it was phenomenologically analogous to the experience of film: that of a darkened space transformed by an inner light, which in turn is transformed into visions, apparitions, images in movement. The legend of Swedenborg was not the cinema’s precursor; it was simply a fable that announced future mysticisms of the Industrial Age—the material dream that lives on within us, of an immaterial matter and space—summarized in the April 1745 revelation of the scholar at the Swedish Academy of Sciences, Emanuel Swedenborg. Just as the esoteric art of memory inspired Leibniz’s notion of infinitesimal calculus, in a symmetrically opposite manner, the Enlightenment inspired Swedenborg’s mysterious prediction of a virtual room inside of a real room: like Lewis Carroll’s looking glass, the former duplicates, transforms and casts doubt upon the latter.

After that night in April, Swedenborg believed that the entire universe was encompassed by that dual room, including the celestial region and the underworld. Something similar occurs in William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973), where the entire film is constructed to converge in a single space: the bedroom of a twelve-year-old girl named Regan McNeil, where the opposing forces of the world are concentrated, where the telluric gods and the forces of levitation, light and darkness, Iraq and Georgetown, Christ and Pazuzu coexist. Friedkin’s theological thriller functions in the same way as Lewis Carroll’s novels where the *whole* tends to shrink down into a *hole* (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*), into a mirror or a chess board (*Through the Looking-Glass*), or into a handkerchief (*Silvie and Bruno Concluded*). This is why Regan’s room has light, temperature and movement of its own; like Swedenborg’s room, its autonomy simultaneously includes and interiorizes both the film and the world.

The Exorcist is a parable of cinema. From start to finish, it is always about films: the possessed girl’s mother is a famous actress in a film being shot within the movie; Father Karras is a spectator at the same film shoot in Georgetown, which is also where the story of *The Exorcist* takes place; the film’s director (played by the Beckettian actor Jack McGowran) is killed by Regan; the police detective, Lieutenant Kinderman, is a movie fan who constantly returns us to this same theme: he insists that Karras resembles the actor John Garfield from the 1951 film *Body and Soul*, and in the final scene, Kinderman invites Father Dyer to the movies, as if nothing had ever happened in Georgetown, at 3600 Prospect Street, inside Regan McNeil’s room: as if, even in the movies, everything were mere cinema.

Regan’s room—a dual room, transformed like Swedenborg’s room was—extends into Regan’s possessed, transformed and dual body. Her room and her body become one at the moment when Regan is hypnotized and, while in trance, is ordered by the hypnotist to open her eyes and observe a space we cannot see. Like Samuel Beckett’s television play *Ghost Trio*, where the space inhabited by the immobile central character is a “mental cabinet,” on account of the law of opposites according to which “motion in this world [of the mind] depended on rest in the world [of the body]” (cf. *Murphy* and *L’Épousé* by Gilles Deleuze), that moment when we are presented with a close frontal shot of Regan both seeing and constructing a mental, extra-cinematographic space, hollows out *The Exorcist* of *The Exorcist*: as if in the ubiquitous gaze of a girl possessed by the Devil, body, room and cinematographic space were not imaginary (because their material reality is never questioned), but rather morbidly utopian.

It is said that long before Mesmer and Charcot ever systematized hypnosis, Swedenborg had perfected breathing techniques that allowed him to achieve “hypnagogic” states in which he could explore heaven and hell. In this sense, Swedenborg’s body was also ubiquitous like the 1745 room, and utopian like that of Regan McNeil. In *The Utopian Body*, Michel Foucault writes that the body is the central character of all utopias. According to him, the body is the world’s ground zero and nonetheless, the body —particularly Regan’s possessed body— is always *someplace else*. The narrative solution of Samuel Beckett’s *Film* is established within this same principle of the body always being someplace else: it is filmed dually, by two eyes —that of external perception and that of self-perception— as if a ground zero were to be, horribly, established in the interstice of that ubiquitous, aterritorial record.

Film is constructed in the same fashion as *The Exorcist*, as a territorial funnel: from the space of a city street, to a building on that street, to a room inside that building, to a rocking-chair in the middle of the room. Like Regan’s room, the one envisioned by Beckett is a microcosm whose fauna (consisting of a cat, a dog, a parrot and a fish) and gods (the image of the Sumerian deity hanging on the wall) allude to a kind of dark micro-Eden, a Biblical garden in miniature to which original sin, the fall of man and the expulsion were inherent, characteristic and necessary. In effect, the actor in Beckett’s film is always expelled from material space by the eye of the camera and expelled from ontological space by the eye of perception. Indeed, this expulsion is *Film*’s only plotline, the only “story” it tells: that of a body —like the bodies and rooms of Friedkin, Carroll, Foucault and Swedenborg— expelled by a dual eye that transforms it into a utopia of itself as it creates a dual record of everything it perceives, an ubiquitous perception that opens a crack, a crease, a hole.

The Swedenborg Room is a research into the gaps, the hollow territories that the cinematographic space can generate. It isn’t that the cinematographic space is called into question, but rather that the space of the spectator, our own space, falls between the crease formed by the physical and immaterial space of cinema (like the hole opened by the two cameras or two eyes used to shoot *Film*), and that crease, that territory —our territory— is the one which is endangered, which becomes utopian. In the sixteenth century, Ignatius of Loyola already understood that the Western image was formed essentially as territoriality, as topographical politics. As such, the retreatant performing the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises had to project himself into an image of the life of Christ, of a deadly sin or of hell in order to *literally* experience Christ, deadly sin or hell. To see the bodies of fire, to hear the cries of the condemned, to smell the putridness of the abyss, to taste the bitterness of tears, to touch the burning fire, meant to physically invoke hell, to extract it from its utopic space in order to carry it back to a new topography, a territoriality, a spatial politics where it would be capable of replacing the world: hence the importance of the trompe l’oeil in the churches of the Society of Jesus, given that the trompe l’oeil *substitutes* the building, hollows it out, confers upon it a mental existence that endangers its material reality.

What utopian spaces bring into play isn’t their particular territoriality but rather our own. In the utopian space, as in the Garden of Eden, we are constantly expelled, and as in all of Beckett’s work, the space of our own body, our voice and our vision, are constantly called into question and submitted to other eyes, other voices and other bodies that are just as questionable as our own. And so, this text creates yet another crease between words and things, and in a sense, betrays the project of *The Swedenborg Room*, “utopianizing” it in language. Nonetheless, even in the crack it opens up, this text also implies a voice, an eye, a body, a room.

P. S.