

# The smallest and most minimal of beings

## Justin Clemens

In 1990, I was completing an Honours degree in English Literature at the University of Melbourne when I contracted tonsillitis.

From the moment I was born, I was sickly. One doctor — exasperated by the undiagnosability of my continuously-fluctuating condition — suggested to my mother that I was suffering from an allergy... to her. She was not pleased by this suggestion, which, even if it had been true (it was not), was gross and unactionable.

As I got older, my malaise mutated into more recognisable forms. Especially when there was pressure exerted by school examinations, I would often collapse with one or another kind of infection. By the time I reached university, this had concretized into a ritual end-of-year tonsillitis.

Tonsillitis is a common disease treatable with antibiotics. That year, however, my throat swelled as I started my final essay for the entire course. I had just finished two long pieces of work, including my thesis. I was tired and desperate. However, the lecturer in charge was notoriously unwelcoming of submissions for extension. I decided simply to work through.

The essay was on the writings of Samuel Beckett; in particular, on his novel trilogy *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, and the *Unnamable*. If you do not know these works, you may still have some sense of Beckett's extreme and singular attentiveness to the micrological details of abjection, poverty, misery, and obscenity, to absolute profanity. Think of Beckett's film *Film*, for instance, starring the incomparable Buster Keaton: at once enigmatic and comedic, slapstick and profound.

Over that long weekend, I became the characters I was writing about. My throat was too swollen to speak or to swallow. I could feel the ooze of pus with every word I scribbled down and scrubbed out. This was still in the days before universal computing, and I can still hear the scritch-scratch of the nib of my cheap blue Bic grating on the lined sheafs. Then it was done. I submitted the essay and went straight to bed.

Two weeks later, I was still in bed.

Usually antibiotics clear up tonsillitis almost immediately. This time was different. My throat remained swollen, I couldn't think straight, I was unutterably lethargic. The months dragged on. The doctor finally returned a diagnosis of *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* — at that stage, a relatively new

nomination — and sent me to a specialist reminiscent of medicos from World War II movies. He rubbed his hands together excitedly whenever he took my blood.

It was like being a child again. I had no job, no money, and was living with my mother. I slept twenty hours a day. I could barely read. Many friends simply drifted away, as there was nothing to be done for me. All I could do — and I did it barely — was watch movies on my VHS player. I floated in and out of consciousness.

The video store down the road quickly ran out of classic movies. I turned to genre flicks, horror first. Horror wasn't for me. I watched a lot of SF. What then? Kung Fu movies were the only genre left in stock. Before that, I'd only ever watched Bruce Lee films — *Enter the Dragon* and so forth — and, perhaps, a few odd Shaw Brothers films from the 1970s.

That was how I came across Jackie Chan. The names of the films bore little relation to Hollywood genres: *Snake and Crane Arts of Shaolin*; *Fearless Hyena*; *Drunken Master*; and so forth. The plots were often minimal. The characters were typically stock. The voice dubbing was appalling. But Jackie Chan was transcendent. I had never seen anyone move like that; moreover, he was smart and funny. You couldn't say that about Chuck Norris. I was further heartened by the realization that Jackie Chan's parents lived in Australia, in Canberra to be exact. There is now a science centre at the Australian National University named after the star.

After a year or so of watching Jackie Chan, I slowly began to improve. When I did, despite the best efforts of my doctors, I enrolled in a kung fu school in Melbourne and began training. I was not a natural, but I was an *enthusiast*.

A few years ago, I saw a TV interview with Chan in which he spoke of the early years of his career. Bruce Lee's genius then dominated the field, and Chan spoke of the problems of competing against the many other talented martial arts masters of the time. Then he came across the films of Buster Keaton: Keaton, Chan said, offered in his athleticism and humour a way of circumventing Lee's domination of martial arts characters, plots and settings, revealing new sets of possible relations for the genre, and new possibilities of action for Chan personally.

Mediaeval European theology was obsessed with the problem of how to conceive of the status of the reality of *relations*. Of all the categories that make up reality, relations are the most mystifying and elusive. It is relatively simple to consider 'number, weight and measure' as real, for instance, but what, precisely, is a concept of a relation that isn't just imaginary or projected onto the objects? It can't be nothing — but it can't quite be something either. We can know perhaps a little of it, but not too much — or it would not be a relation but already a substantial being.

St Thomas Aquinas's definition turns out to be exemplary: a relation is an *ens minimum*, the smallest of beings. As the philosopher Rodolphe Gasché explains: 'Minimal things are not merely things at their barest, things at the verge of ceasing to be things, but also things that are already something other than things.' This is the fundamental paradox of the thinking of *building relations*: to be realistic, we must accept the minimal nature of relations, but, in doing so, we must also affirm that they alone might thereby take us places we could never have foreseen at the start.

I was once very sick from studying Samuel Beckett; I became better through watching Jackie Chan; I find today we all found new potentials for creation and action in our diverse cinematic relations to the comedian Buster Keaton.

We can sometimes build the most successful relations — multiple, affective, unexpected and profane — without conscious planning.

# 最微弱最低限度的存在物

## 贾斯丁·克莱门斯

1990年我得了扁桃腺炎，当时我正在墨尔本大学读英国文学荣誉学位而且快毕业了。

从一出生我就是个病秧子。我的医生---一个被我千变万化的症状搞得不知所措的医生---无奈地猜测说我可能对我妈过敏。。。我妈听了当然不高兴。这话就算是真的（其实不是），说出来也太恐怖了，要她怎么办呢？

随着年龄的增长，我的那些症状变得可以辨认了。尤其是学校考试带来的压力，往往能使我的身体不断地发炎。上大学以后，就发展成了历年一次的年终扁桃腺炎。

扁桃腺炎吃抗生素就能治愈。可是那年我正在作结业论文，嗓子突然肿了起来。当时我刚写完两篇长论文，又着急又疲乏。我们那位老师向来不喜欢学生拖延交论文，所以我一咬牙坚持了下来。

我的论文研究的是塞缪尔·贝克特（Samuel Beckett）的小说三部曲，即“莫洛瓦”（Malloy），“马龙之死”（Malone Dies），和“无名氏”（Unnamable）。即便你不了解这些作品，你可能对他的写作特点会略知一二：极其专注描写人的落魄，穷困，悲哀，猥琐与至贱。想想那部由巴斯特·基顿（Buster-Keaton）主演的贝克特的“电影”（Film），你会立刻感受到他特有的那种诡异，诙谐，滑稽然而深刻的风格。

那是一次长周末，我成了自己论文中论述的人物。嗓子肿的说不出话咽不下东西。每写一个字都能感觉到嗓子眼里往外冒脓。那时电脑还没普及，我似乎还能听到我那杆不值钱的圆珠笔在横格纸上划拉字时刷刷的声音。最后终于写完了，交了论文我就直接倒在床上了。

两个星期以后，我还在床上躺着。

一般来讲，吃抗生素扁桃腺炎马上就能好。这次却不然。我的喉咙仍不消肿，我思维迟钝，整个人都昏昏噩噩的。又托了好几个月，医生才最终确诊了：“慢性疲劳综合症”---那时这还是新名词---他把我送到一个专家那儿治疗。可每次抽我的血，这个专家都摩拳擦掌激动不已，这让我想起了反应第二次世界大战的一部电影里那些战地卫生员们。

就好像又回到了童年：我没有工作，没有钱，跟母亲生活在一起。我每天睡二十个小时的觉，没法看书。我原来的朋友都渐渐地离我而去；因为跟我什么都干不了。而我所能做的---如果还能做的话---就只能是看录像机放的电影了。就这样我每天在忽而清醒忽而昏睡之中度过。

我很快就把附近那家录像带店的电影全看完了，然后我只好看杂片了，先从恐怖片看起。发现恐怖片不是我的菜，我又看科幻片，看了很多。然后呢？然后就只剩下功夫片了。我以前只看过李小龙的电影---比如“龙争虎斗”---除此之外还看过邵氏电影公司1970年代制作的几部功夫片。

就这样我知道了成龙（Jackie Chan）。他电影的名字跟好莱坞的风格大相径庭，什么“少林蛇鹤八步”，“龙腾虎跃”和“醉拳”。几乎没什么故事情节，人物典型脸谱化，配音糟糕得叫人瞠目结舌。但是成龙却超然之上，我从没有见过像他那样的身手。而且他那人又聪明又诙谐，比查克·诺里斯（Chuck Norris）强多了。听说成龙的父母曾经住在澳大利亚---更准确地说在堪培拉---我的心更暖了。现在在“澳洲国家大学”有一个科学中心就是以成龙的名字命名的。

看成龙的电影看了一年半载以后，我的身体状况有所好转。于是不听医生的劝告，执意报名参加墨尔本的一所功夫学校。我在那儿接受训练，虽说不是天生好手，但也算是个死心塌地的徒弟了。

几年前，我看到一期采访成龙的电视节目，谈他早年的生涯。那时还是李小龙的天下，成龙讲了他是如何跟功夫界同行竞争的经历。然后他又谈到巴斯特·基顿。成龙说是基顿让他学会了用矫健的身手与幽默感在功夫电影无处不在的李小龙影响下脱颖而出。成龙给功夫片传统风格加进了新颖的元素，也为他本人的动作片拓宽了路子

欧洲中世纪的神学念念不忘论证“关联”的真实性问题。在诸多现实事物当中，关联最为神秘，隐晦。相比之下，数字，重量，衡量作为真实性的标准要简单得多。关联到底是什么，它除了我们附加之上的想象或主观投射以外，是否具备实在性。它不可能是空无的，然而又不是什么实体。我们能了解一点，但又不多，否则它就不成其为关联而成为实体存在了。

托马斯-阿奎纳（Thomas Aquinas）给的定义很有代表性，他把关联定义为“最低限度存在”(*ens minimum*)，即存在物的最下限。正像哲学家罗道夫-加什（Rodolphe Gasche）解释的那样，“显现度最低的事物不仅仅表现为荒芜，几近空洞；而更在于它已超越其实体存在。”这便是意识到“关联性”时出现的最根本的悖论：现实的态度就是必须接受关联性的最低显现度。如此做来，我们还必须肯定关联性自身能毫无征兆地把我们带入另一境界。

我研究萨缪尔-贝克特的时候病得不轻；看成龙的电影身体却好起来。我发现我们在观看喜剧演员巴斯特·基顿的电影时，都会发觉各自不同的创造潜力并付诸不同的行动。