

# *Samuel Beckett and Television*

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**Abstract:** *This article focuses on the plays and adaptation written for television by Beckett, having already explored radio and even cinema, in addition to his works for theatre and texts in prose. With his stated preference for visual language and his obsession with minimalism, nothing better than television; besides, without words, he was able to give an original treatment to subjects previously covered: unhappy love, time, death and loneliness, often through melancholic recollection. He was thus an inventor of “a totally new genre”: “visual poems or without words”, some with music, as Martin Esslin classified these small masterpieces.\**

The première of *Waiting for Godot*, (written between October 1948 and January 1949) in Paris in 1953, brought Beckett both applause and criticism from spectators who could not imagine the worldwide reputation that he would go on to achieve – one of the pillars of contemporary theatre and a landmark in the history of the theatre. He went on to consolidate his fame with other notable plays: *Endgame*, *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Happy Days*. Then at the beginning of the 1960s, his work entered a new phase.

Dedicating himself more and more to the performance of his plays, he became increasingly worried about his playwriting: as a result his work became more formalist, with a more visual and balanced measure of verbal language or, rather, of *images* and *words*; further, his works became more static, lyrical rather than dramatic.

The 1960s was the richest, most productive and varied period of Beckett’s career, culminating with his Nobel Prize (1969), and included writing for the theatre and texts in prose. The latter, though short, were highly creative, because Beckett was not only a minimalist, but also fascinated by new communication media. In the 1950s he had already produced his radio masterpiece *All That Fall*, and he now further explored the medium with two radio plays in which *music* is a character that engages in a dialogue with other characters, rather than being merely background music – *Words and Music* (1961) and *Cascando* (1962). He became briefly involved in *cinema*, with a silent film featuring Buster Keaton, *Film* (1963-4), and a further première with *Eh Joe* (1966) in *television*, in which he was to continue working almost up to his death.

Radio, cinema, television – represented a new Beckett. Radio was a challenge for him, having always been concerned with the *image*. It is sufficient to mention the famous pantomimes of the 1950s, which are a kind of symbolic ballet, although without music, with their expressive synthesis of man's existence in a hostile, irrational universe, where nothing justifies his arrival, since he is already condemned to death: *Act Without Words I* and *II* (1957 and 1959). It is true that words and sounds, in general, can create the visual, paint an environment, but *television* can be more complete. Beckett became an adept.

His transition to TV was facilitated by his previous collaboration with the BBC in London. The directors of his radio plays had gone into the new medium and, without officially granting him the title of “director”, they accepted his collaboration, allowing him to follow and control the creative process of the video. He worked not only in London, but also in Stuttgart (Süddeutscher Rundfunk), where he became a director of his own texts, with Jim Lewis as a collaborator. As always, he demanded the utmost precision, in all aspects – movement, light, and sound. As he himself admitted, working in televised plays satisfied his need to be able to control the place where the characters develop, as well as to be in charge of the lighting.

Television enabled him to realise his long-held aspiration of escaping from verbal language and from literature, since they seemed limited to him. His dissatisfaction with words can be traced back to a letter written in German to Axel Kaunt in 1936, in which he confesses:

To write in conventional English is becoming more and more difficult for me, although it seems absurd. And, *more and more*, my own language seems like a *veil to me that needs to be torn, in order to reach things* (or nothing) that are beyond ... Considering that we cannot eliminate language with one blow alone, *we must at least not neglect anything that can contribute to its discredit* (...) (my italics)<sup>1</sup>

This serves to explain Beckett's partiality to television and, above all, his last plays, *Quad I* and *II* and *Nacht und Träume*, which can be considered neither within the category of ballet nor that of mime plays, since they represent “a totally new genre: visual poems”, according to Martin Esslin.<sup>2</sup> These plays are purely visual, or silent, poems, since, being *without words*, they present, in Esslin's words, “the condensation of the maximum experience in a graphic metaphor”.

Beckett's work for television became ever more economical, concentrated and refined. In his first television play, *Eh Joe* (1966), a feminine voice is heard echoing in the central character's conscience, with a coincidence between the voice and the camera, which focalises on the protagonist (in all the plays, this is a man, although the woman is mentally present). However, in *Ghost Trio*, written nine years later, the voice is no longer an interior monologue, because the woman who emits it does not participate in the action, but is merely the presenter or master of ceremonies, always followed by the camera, welcoming the spectators and describing the place of action to them until the

protagonist appears. Afterwards, the image talks through him. If, in the previous work, there was no music, in this one it plays a relevant part: it is the artistic expression of the protagonist's emotional state.

*Eh Joe* lasts 35:33 minutes and has only one character, Joe, in his fifties, who is seen by the camera, in his room, at ease in his dressing gown; at the beginning he is sitting on the edge of his bed with his back to the camera. Then he becomes agitated, begins to open and close the window, the door, the wardrobe, to lock all the exits and spy under his bed, until he relaxes with his eyes closed. The camera that focuses on him, following him, shows that he opens his eyes on hearing a feminine voice – the voice of his conscience, even if confused with his current lover. In nine progressive movements, the camera comes closer and closer to Joe's face, while the voice tells him about the young girl he abandoned who, in desperation, committed suicide. Voice and camera persecute him, and his face progressively becomes larger until it takes up the whole screen. Camera and voice are inflexible; the voice brings him happy and desperate memories.

In a certain sense this play comes close to the silent *Film*, in which the protagonist tries to avoid the glances, to lock all the openings to preserve his *I*; but the difference is that the protagonist is only seen from the front; only for a moment at the end of *Eh Joe* is the protagonist seen from the front, as, from a certain point, the camera comes closer, showing the anguish of his thoughts. His thoughts are provoked by the voice, and registered by the camera, which functions as a "revealing character", giving him no respite. The growing tension of the man listening to the voice is visible. He is imprisoned. Since the image and the voice are rigorously complementary, both disappear together. Final darkness and silence take over.

Much more elaborate and complex is *Ghost Trio*, written in 1975 and staged in 1977, in Stuttgart, Germany, under the title *Geister Trio*. Initially it was called *Tryst*. It deals with a desired "meeting", expected by the protagonist, but which fails to take place. The person expected, the loved woman, fails to arrive for the meeting, as in *Waiting for Godot*, a fact that is also transmitted by a young messenger, here merely discerned at the door, who then leaves, having made an imperceptible movement with his head, without words.

The play is short – 31:30 minutes – and has a plot in three parts. In the first, a feminine voice describes and introduces the elements that make up the image. As a presenter, the voice welcomes the spectators (for example it receives them with the advice that they should not increase the volume of their apparatuses), ironically describes the place in which the action will take place, i.e., the typical bedroom of the Beckett protagonists: sombre and bare, with just a simple bed near the window. This part ends with the introduction of protagonist *S* (silhouette), seated, leaning forward and holding a tape-recorder playing Beethoven, which gives the title to the play: *Ghost Trio*. This recorder, however, will only become visible at the end. In the second part, the female voice/presenter introduces the protagonist's *actions*. He moves towards the door, then

to the window, to the bed, to the mirror and, again, to the door, believing that the person he is expecting has arrived. In the third part, the voice that introduced *the image* remains silent, preparing the development of the action: action with neither words nor *image*. The action is restricted to the movements of the protagonist, who opens the window, but only sees the falling rain, and walks towards the mirror, where, for the first time, his savage traces are seen, and to the arrival of the messenger with the sad news that the loved one is not coming, reintroducing the image of the old protagonist with the greyish hair, once more seated and waiting ... It is the subject of the desired meeting and the frustrated wait, reminiscent of that in *Waiting for Godot*, is embellished by the second movement of Beethoven's Trio for Piano, Viola and Cello, op. 70 no. 1, known as the *Ghost Trio*, coming from the tape-recorder. The man then lifts his head and, in a close-up, once more reveals his broken-up face, worn out by the years and his suffering – it is the *final image*, in an effective association of vision and sound. The composition, one of Beckett's favourites, expresses the emotion of the old man, who adopts it unconsciously; it is in harmony with his longing *I*, waiting for she who is dead, who did not and will not come.

It is an inspired play of longing and of waiting in vain, economically expressed. It has been described as a “poem without words”, which, curiously, as Martin Esslin points out, presents a verbal plot through the feminine voice, while the protagonist remains silent and “the piece is mimed”, in an inversion of the Elizabethan theatre, in which the play was preceded by a story, this one, indeed, mimed.

In the same year, 1977, and in the same place, Beckett presented his play *Nur noch gewölkt*, the German translation of ... *but the clouds ...* (1976), just 15-16 minutes long. The play was later translated into French by Edith Fournier. The title comes from the last stanza of a long poem by William Butler Yeats, “The Tower” (1926), of which Beckett evokes the last seven lines and specifically quotes the last four:

But the clouds of the sky  
When the horizon fades  
Or a bird's sleepy cry  
Among the deepening shades.

The previous play expressed the pain for the loved one's absence, and here Beckett works with the reciprocal part of the same emotion: the longing of the dead one, with the obsessive appeal for her impossible return dominating the melancholic climate. The technique adopted is similar to that of *Ghost Trio*: the voice verbally introduces the elements that constitute the *image*; immediately afterwards, the image wordlessly speaks for itself. There is also an introductory voice, a male voice that expresses itself in the first person – that of the old protagonist, *H*, who is the one who remembers. He sits with his back to the public on a footstool, in a dressing gown, invisible,

leaning over an invisible table. Then another man appears on the stage, *HI*, the one remembered. It is the recollection of an old man who has a double. This character, wearing a hat and overcoat, comes out of the darkness, which becomes lighter towards the centre; he advances, becomes immobile, leaves again for the darkness from whence he came; he returns, dressed differently now: in a dressing gown, like *H*, and repeats the movements, but in another direction, in time with the voice. He repeats the sequence, going forwards and backwards in the darkness, while *H* refers to his loved one, pleading for her presence. Finally a female *face* (only the face) appears. *HI*'s lips, synchronised with the voice of *H*, pronounce the lines of the poem almost inaudibly. The quotation is repeated, as are the movements of *HI* and the focussing, whether on *H* or the face (lips, eyes), ending the text with the same lines being spoken and repeated. The play ends in darkness and silence. When Beethoven's music is not heard, the play is embellished by Yeats's poem, which Beckett had re-read shortly prior to writing the text. According to James Knowlson<sup>3</sup>, the play's original working title was *Poetry only love*.

Beckett's penultimate work for television, written in English in 1982 under the German title, *Nacht und Träume*, is extremely light in tone. Inspired by one of the last of Schubert's *Lieder* (Opus 43, no. 2, in B major) and associated with a poem by the Austrian Heinrich Josef von Collin, it is another authentic visual poem. It takes place in a sombre and empty space, dimly lit by night light coming through the window, from above – it is a typical Beckett set, sombre and unwelcoming. It is also characteristic of the author's whole trajectory, with its protagonist an old grey-haired man, seated with his hands on a table. He is the dreamer, simply named *A*, or he who has a dream, escaping from reality; he dreams *himself* – he is *B* who appears on an invisible podium, one and a half metres high.

At the beginning only the head and hands of *A* can be seen very clearly; and a man's voice is heard humming the *Lied*, a melody that will be heard again only at the end, with the text in German, now very clearly:

Kehre wieder, heilige Nacht  
holde Träume, Kehre wider  
(Holy Night, return again  
Fair dreams, return again)

This beautiful melody, another of Beckett's favourites, opens and closes the play, as though in a soft musical frame. As a matter of fact, the entire play is all softness and delicacy, with non-static images moving tenderly.

In the dream, *A* sees *B* seated with his head between his hands, like himself and also lit up, though more faintly; he also sees female hands, without a body, that rest lightly on the head of *B*, and disappear when he tries to see who it is. At one moment it is the left hand (*L*), at another it is the right (*R*) that offers him a goblet, from which he

then drinks; the *L* then returns with a cloth to dry his forehead, also delicately. He makes an effort to see the invisible face and the hands rapidly withdraw. He leaves the palm of his right hand upturned, and the female *R* hand joins it. Looking down, he lifts his other hand and covers the two already united. He then leans his head down upon them, with the female *L* hand softly posing on his reclined head.

It is a delicate and ethereal game of hands, which may seem excessively sentimental to some, but, emphasised by the light, is of an undeniably sweet beauty. The image of the dream, which had been on the right side, moves to the centre and occupies the space completely, with a series of movements that are immediately repeated more slowly, before the camera returns to its initial point. The dream disappears; *A*, the dreamer disappears. The light dims. It is the end, with Schubert's sweet music, underlining the delicacy of the feelings, on Christmas night, a special night for those who believe in it: *Nacht und Träume – Heilige Nacht*. But for Beckett? It is well known that his religious upbringing was very severe and austere on his mother's side, although tempered by his father.

The following work was completely different: *Quad I – II* (1980), a short piece, only 14:58 minutes long, also produced by the Süddeutscher Rundfunk and transmitted by the RFA in 1981, with Beckett as director, once again aided by Jim Lewis. It is an enigmatic, harsh work, which yields to no delicacy or sentimentalism. There is no music, poetry, or words. There is only *image*, and the sounds from the steps of four actors, covered by long, white tunics with hoods that hide their faces. Always silent, they walk through a certain area, monotonously, slowly, following their own course, rhythmically, each one with different steps, never stopping nor trying to escape from the space in which they are (a square), avoiding the centre (danger zone). From there comes the title, *Quad*, an abbreviation of quadrilateral.

The routes – 1, 2, 3 and 4 – are carefully, mathematically, indicated with combinations, forming *solos*, *duos* and *trios*, without any collision between the actors and with no rest. The author shows the paths by means of a diagram, reproducing a star within a square, which can lead to peculiar hypotheses. Could it be a kind of mysterious ritual, with these strange hooded figures moving as if in a silent dance without ever touching the centre? Only their steps are heard because, in filming, Beckett eliminated the percussion that accompanied them. He also replaced the coloured tunics (each character originally wore a different colour) with white ones, with the intention of creating an aura of simplicity and sobriety. Might the characters be clergymen, or followers of a mysterious cult? Martin Esslin argued that the play was “an emblematic creation” to be deciphered by the public. The play is certainly mysterious, with its characters, identified not by letters but by numbers alone, walking ceaselessly in silence.

Jim Lewis, interviewed by Sandra Solov, supplies the key to the riddle: it is the visualisation of time; and the characters are prisoners of time, because the square is a prison-square, the “quadrature of the detention”, according to Beckett himself. But, being a prisoner of time (and of the camera that focuses on the square), it can be said, is to be, in short, a prisoner of life – a prisoner condemned to life and to death – until

death. It is an impressive work, austere in its simplicity and purity of image, without words and without music. According to Beckett, the rhythmic sound of the steps, in a black and white video, is a means of reaching the essential.

I would like to turn now to *What Where*. Although this play was written for the theatre, it was subsequently adapted for television by Beckett himself and, like his other television work in Stuttgart, was a collaboration with Lewis.<sup>4</sup> Short, just 15:43 minutes long, it is a strange piece: although the title suggests interrogations, the play does not present the corresponding answers, and interrogations are constant throughout the script. Some critics argue that it is a political interrogation. Is it an attack on totalitarianism? One of its themes is certainly that of torture, which had previously been discussed by the author in a radio text of the 1960s and in the stage play *Catastrophe* (1982). It is a registration, or, better, denunciation, of torture and the mechanical routine of an interrogation. The mechanistic nature of the process is represented by the fact that the play's three characters, with their phonetically similar names, Bem, Bim, Bom, seem to be equivalent in everything and could be reduced to one.

They are very similar to each other, not only because of their sombre external appearance, with their long greyish hair and long greyish tunics, but also because of their answers to questions formulated by the relentless investigator, Bam. The answers are always the same, uttered in the middle of a light-dark space. The three characters parade, always in the same rhythm, before Bam, who is perpetually demanding and dissatisfied. Bam's voice is not emitted directly, but comes from a loudspeaker suspended at the right. The disembodied voice sets the scene, announcing the entrance and exit of each of the interrogated, and also speaks of the passing of time. Time goes by and nothing changes. At the beginning, spring; at the end, winter, announces the voice, which concludes the text with: "Understand whoever can", an ironical line that sounds like a challenge and allows for different interpretations.

Referring to Bam, who asks questions and then corrects himself, criticising himself because he is dissatisfied with them, Martha Feshenfeld argues that everything happens as if the play were "being tested", that is, being judged, assessed by the "severe look of a judge who is its creator"<sup>5</sup>. So why not judge *What Where* from an aesthetic, rather than a political point of view? Could Beckett be concerned with aesthetics? Some critics argue that the play could also be art material itself, because literary art implies that the right words be extracted from a work that Beckett himself defined as being "absolute torture", and the concluding line, "Understand whoever can", is a challenge to the spectator/reader: discover the meaning.

With the exception of *What Where*, which is an adaptation for television of a work written for the theatre, the plays written specially for television share a common theme: *love* evoked or the evocation of a past love. If *time* imprisons man, untiringly, without a break, until death, well illustrated in *Quad*, which is as dry, harsh and hard as its subject, in the other plays examined here, time is also almighty. Time rules life and consumes love, or the loved one, without compassion. It condemns man to live, to grow old and to die.

The protagonists of all the plays are men with greyish hair, who have lived their lives and seen the death of their loved one, and are now unhappy. Condemned to loneliness, to nostalgia, they plead in vain for the return of the past. They are condemned by time to live longer, and also to live an empty life, in which waiting and hope are frustrated. Only the memory remains, the evocation of love. When this is associated with remorse, as in the first play, *Eh Joe*, it results in the anguished self-confrontation of the guilty conscience.

It will be recalled that, in 1930, while still very young, Beckett wrote his award-winning essay, "Proust"<sup>6</sup>, on *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which is itself based on the negation of death and is considered to be a monument erected against the erosion of time. However, Beckett saw it as a pile of ruins or the victory of destruction, of death, because time can never be found again. Beckett's interpretation thus inverts the Proustian viewpoint: to evoke the dead past is not to resuscitate it. Samuel Beckett, television author, is, above all, a poet, a sensitive poet-painter who uses images in movement, completely abandoning, in certain plays, the articulate word. Creator of "visual poems", he produced a "new genre" that also deserves to be commemorated for its lyricism.

## Notes

- \* Text revised by Peter James Harris (UNESP – State University of São Paulo)
- 1 Beckett sent the now-famous letter to Axel Kaunt, whom he met during a trip to Germany, in 1936. It is an important document in which he outlines his aesthetic programme at a very early stage in his writing career (In *Disjecta – Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn, 1984. 19-33).
- 2 M. Esslin focuses on Beckett's television plays, insisting on the novelty of his creation: "a totally new genre" (In *Revue d'Esthétique – Samuel Beckett*, 1986. 391-404).
- 3 J. Knowlson, important biographer of Samuel Beckett, supplies much information on his work (*Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 1997. 634).
- 4 J. Lewis, interviewed, comments on his work with Beckett during many stage productions, being very familiar both with the author's intentions and his demands. ("Beckett et la caméra". In *Revue d'Esthétique – Samuel Beckett*, 1986. 371-379)
- 5 Based on the political aspect of the work, M. Feshenfeld gives a very original, aesthetic interpretation. Form was, in fact, a concern for Beckett throughout his career.
- 6 Beckett wrote many works in which *time* and *evocation* are fundamentally important. The following radio plays are mentioned: *Embers* (1959), *Cascando* (1964), the televised work *Eh Joe* (1966) and those for the theatre, such as *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Not I* (1972), among others.

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