

SAMUEL BECKETT'S
PLAYS ON FILM
AND TELEVISION

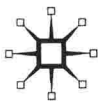
GRALEY HERREN



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Graley Herren

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Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television

For Cathy and Dylan

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CHAPTER 1

Beckett's Memory Machines

Like many of his modernist forebears, Samuel Beckett heeded Ezra Pound's clarion call to "make it new" by "making it old anew." Nowhere are Beckett's impulses to "make it old" more acutely displayed than in his encounters with the relatively new media of film and television. From his first venture behind the camera in the mid-1960s filming *Film* with Alan Schneider, through his last stint in the mid-1980s adapting *What Where* for German television, Beckett approaches the typically frenetic and forward-looking filmed media with a gaze fixed backwards and an ear attuned to echoes from the past. As C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski observe in *The Grove Companion*, "Writing for Beckett was always a haunting echo of memory, personal and cultural. Learning to read Beckett, again, is to approach him as already a repetition, an echo of his reading, of his culture, and finally of himself" (xvi). Those echoes are especially resonant in Beckett's teleplays, the primary focus of the present study. In the teleplays Beckett broadcasts multilayered, medium-specific confrontations between present and past, perception and memory, subject and object, presence and absence. Here "making it old" does not mean making it artistically stagnant and mired in nostalgia. Rather, Beckett rigorously explored the potential and exploited the limitations of mechanical media—first radio, then film, and ultimately television—to serve as memory machines: sites for recollecting and reinventing personal, philosophical, and artistic pasts.

* * *

Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television is the first full-length study devoted exclusively to Beckett's screen work. This may come as a surprise to new scholars who find the library shelves bowing beneath the weight of so many Beckett books. The screen work accounts for a significant portion of Beckett's later oeuvre, so why has it attracted disproportionately little attention from the Beckett industry? Speculations range from the infrequency of

screenings and rebroadcasts, to the paucity of available copies, to the suspect nature of television as a corrupt (and corrupting) medium, to the basic inscrutability of the teleplays themselves—which, like the shades that inhabit them, stubbornly resist yielding their meaning. There have been numerous articles and book chapters devoted to the teleplays, many of them excellent; my own work has benefited enormously from these predecessors, and I will acknowledge them in due course. Nonetheless, the entire teleplay corpus still awaits a “sequel” to Clas Zilliacus’s *Beckett and Broadcasting*. Published in 1976 by Finland’s Åbo Akademi with the subtitle “A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television,” this groundbreaking study is a model of scrupulous, comprehensive research. Through individual textual analysis, intertextual comparative analysis, and contextual sensitivity to medium-specific concerns of production and reception, Zilliacus examines all of Beckett’s radio plays and the first teleplay. He takes a narrow, underestimated body of work and establishes its ingenuity and worth. Like all subsequent scholars who have studied Beckett and broadcasting, I am indebted to Zilliacus’s example. It is sadly ironic that *Beckett and Broadcasting*, a book that did so much to rescue the radio plays from obscurity, has itself now lapsed largely into obscurity, a dusty collector’s item difficult to lay one’s hands on anymore. On this state of affairs I can only echo Ruby Cohn’s plea in *A Beckett Canon* that this unsurpassed volume is “a book that should be republished” (304).

In many ways the present book attempts to pick up where Zilliacus leaves off. He addresses only one of the teleplays, *Eh Joe* (composed 1965 / broadcast 1966), which was already ten years old by then. Zilliacus surely could not have suspected when he signed his preface in December 1975 that, within a year, Beckett would have tripled his televisual output, composing two new teleplays for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and filming his own German versions for Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR). In fact, the ten years following the publication of *Beckett and Broadcasting* marked the most sustained and productive period of Beckett’s television career, yielding *Ghost Trio* (composed 1976 / broadcast 1977),...*but the clouds...* (composed 1976 / broadcast 1977), *Quadrat I + II* (composed and broadcast 1982),¹ *Nacht und Träume* (composed 1982 / broadcast 1983), and *Was Wo* (composed for stage 1983 / adapted 1985 / broadcast 1986).² In short, just as Zilliacus was closing the most comprehensive study of Beckett and broadcasting to date, Beckett was just beginning to write and record his greatest contributions to the subject.

The present book looks back at Beckett’s backward-looking screen work in its entirety and in its discrete parts. It attempts to apply the same rigorous standards of textual, intertextual, and contextual analysis found in Zilliacus,

but with the advantage of having the complete teleplay corpus available for dissection. Each teleplay is addressed in its own individual chapter and arranged sequentially. Each subsequent chapter addresses the unique conditions, concerns, and challenges of the individual work at hand while also considering the progressive (and regressive) trajectory of the television work on the whole. In this respect, too, my approach resembles that of Zilliacus. "In discussing the individual radio plays of Beckett," he writes, "I have argued that they have been conceived in terms of their designated media, and increasingly so for each successive work; this argument is central to my study" (169). I make the same general argument for the teleplays as well. However, I also make a more specific thematic argument anticipated by my opening remarks. For all their individual idiosyncrasies, one theme dominates the teleplays more than any other: Memory. Beckett's abiding fascination with memory is certainly not confined to his work on screen; indeed, Ackerley and Gontarski distinguish "the shaping fictive power of memory" as Beckett's "later great theme" in general (364). What I wish to consider for the rest of this introductory chapter, and to reconsider regularly throughout my entire study, are the medium-specific ways in which Beckett wrestles with memory throughout the teleplays.

* * *

"What can I but enumerate old themes" asks Yeats in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (9).³ Of the six teleplays, five explicitly enumerate Beckett's old theme of memory: Joe hears the voice of a former lover who taunts him with a description of still another jilted lover in *Eh Joe*; a male figure (F) is lost in reverie, listening to Beethoven and listening for the return of an absent woman from his past in *Ghost Trio*; another male figure (M) recalls his many nights waiting, usually in vain, for a visitation from his dead "woman lost" (W) in ...*but the clouds*...; a dreamer (A) fantasizes about (or remembers?) the solace from a mysterious pair of helping hands in *Nacht und Träume*; and the Voice of Bam (manifest on screen as a blurry face) orchestrates rough interrogations in the "field of memory" in *Was Wo*.⁴ Memory is in truth a vital concern in most of Beckett's late work. Yet the treatment of the subject in the teleplays is distinct from the rest of the oeuvre because the medium is uniquely suited to serve as a vehicle for memory. Consider the contrast with theatre. In Beckett's stage plays he frequently draws reflexive attention to the conditions of live performance. The spectacle is happening here and now—only here and only now, living and expiring before a roomful of witnesses who gaze collectively from the darkness. The conditions for viewing a filmed or taped performance are fundamentally different. While the spectator does in a sense experience the filmed performance (at least the first time) in the here

and now, in the present, he or she by no means experiences the performance in the *presence*—for the actors are long gone, and the audience is dispersed among countless individual households. All we see are shades of absent figures and echoes of extinguished voices, and, according to Beckett's ideal conditions for spectatorship, we witness it all from the privacy of an inner sanctum. As in the occult connotation of the term "medium," Beckett exploits the television medium as a private interface between the living and dead, the present and absent, perception and memory.

The televisual spectacle is by its very nature spectral; it is an illusion of light and sound; there is no *there* there. In this sense it is the perfect medium for wrestling with memory, because like memory it is an illusion where absence is an irrefutable and unbridgeable given. Consider, for instance, the necessary differences between viewing the memory play *Not I* live in the theater, as opposed to viewing it when it aired on the BBC tele-trilogy *Shades* in 1977, or viewing it subsequently on videotape. If one attended a live performance of *Not I*, say one of Billie Whitelaw's performances at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, one could hypothetically have rushed up on stage during the show and rescued poor Billie from that awful contraption holding her head steady in the spotlight. No one ever did that, and I cannot imagine that either actress or audience would have appreciated the gesture. But the point is that it could happen because the performer and the audience are really there, in that theater at that moment in time. Conversely, one could not rescue Billie Whitelaw from the TV version of *Not I* because the spectator and performer shared neither the same space nor the same time. By the time the program first aired on April 17, 1977, the play being broadcast was already over; the spectacle was already spectral. Whitelaw had long since been freed from her contraption; in fact she memorably describes sitting uncomfortably alongside Beckett as a *spectator* of her own spectral broadcast.⁵

If I am stating some obvious truths about television, it is only because the obvious is so often overlooked. Beckett does not overlook the obvious, however; he estranges the obvious by drawing attention to the ethereal nature of television so easily buried beneath the pall of convention. Even as we watch Whitelaw's performance on tape, we know that her here is not our here, her now is not our now. TV-Billie is not really there and never was. However, the companion to this truth is that her trace, her echo, her ghost remains in her absence. Furthermore, her ghost is only a play button away from instant reanimation, and this potential will remain even after the real Billie Whitelaw is no more. This is the spectral nature of recorded media—never truly there, yet always with us. Jacques Derrida brilliantly captured the simultaneously "live" and dead nature of television in a 1993 filmed interview for INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel), transcribed in the book *Echographies of Television*.

Referring to the televised interview being recorded at that very moment, Derrida reflected,

Well, precisely because we know now, under the lights, in front of the camera, listening to the echo of our own voices, that this live moment will be able to be—that it is already—captured by machines that will transport and perhaps show it, God knows when and God knows where, we already know that death is here. The INA is a machine, and this machine works like a kind of undertaker, recording things and archiving moments about which we know a priori that, no matter how soon after their recording we die, and even if we were to die while recording, *voilà*, this will be and will remain “live,” a simulacrum of life. (39)

Television simultaneously kills and resuscitates that which it records. It turns the “live” moment into a dead artifact, yet it retains the capacity, God knows when and where, to reanimate those artifacts from the past, even after the literal deaths of those who participated in the original recorded moment. Beckett exploits precisely this spectral dynamic. It is no accident that his teleplays are haunted by ghosts, because all televisual images are essentially traces of the “living dead.” He orients his teleplays steadfastly toward the absent past in order to foreground the medium’s propensity to recall the dead to life—to serve, that is, as memory machine.

* * *

The teleplays are also haunted by Beckett’s own rich cultural memory. Though the pieces are all short, and though they increasingly drift away from their moorings in language, they are nevertheless remarkably allusive. Beckett “makes it old” in the teleplays by linking his work back to dozens of predecessors, many of them premodern, and ranging across the cultural spectrum, from philosophy to psychology, to classical music and painting, through poetry and silent films, to sculpture and dance. Nevertheless, these pieces, rooted in the past, are not products of nostalgia. The teleplays simultaneously engage and estrange tradition, invoking artistic predecessors only to resist, refute, and revise them. Of course, according to T.S. Eliot, creative tension with tradition has always been a hallmark of genuine participation within tradition.⁶ The following study looks back at the dialectic between the each teleplay and an array of sources from Beckett’s deep reservoir of cultural memory. Such intertextuality continually forces us, as V commands in *Ghost Trio*, to “Look again” (*Complete Dramatic Works* 409) at traditional sources from a fresh critical perspective.⁷

The extended project of the teleplays is to engage with memory *qua* memory, and with ghosts from Beckett’s own cultural memory, all the while

reflecting rigorously upon the memory-machinery of his medium. This entire process bears renewed witness to his claims on an Irish cultural inheritance. Beckett's status as an "Irish writer" has always been contested, not least by the author himself. In 1938 for instance, during the first decade of the Irish Free State, Beckett wrote to his nationalist friend Thomas MacGreevy, "I can't think of Ireland the way you do," in part because of a "chronic inability to understand as a member of any proposition a phrase like 'the Irish people.'"⁸ Around this same time Beckett famously cast his lot with France at war over Ireland at peace, beginning a voluntary exile from Ireland and from "Irishness" that would last the rest of his life. Until quite recently most critics have followed Beckett's lead in turning their backs on his homeland. "The tendency, especially in English and French criticism, has been to depict Beckett as an ahistorical pessimist," observes Ronan McDonald. "Beckett's art is seen as loftily uninterested in the tawdry distractions of day-to-day life. And, or so the story goes, as history and politics are jettisoned in the interests of universal authenticity, geography and national locale are shed along with it—we are left with the characteristically rootless Beckettian landscape" (141). Since his death concerted efforts have been made to reclaim Dublin's native son, with varying degrees of success.⁹ Yet anyone who has ever attempted to teach Beckett, particularly his late drama, in the context of an Irish literature course knows how awkwardly he fits with his compatriots on the syllabus.

This aberrational status may tell us more about the inadequacy of prevailing cultural stereotypes than about Beckett's apparent "un-Irishness," however. Though Nicholas Miller does not address Beckett per se in his book *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory*, he nevertheless provides a useful paradigm for understanding Beckett in an Irish context. Miller attempts to redirect critical focus in Irish studies away from the theme of obsession with Irish history and toward a memory-centered process of selective remembering and creative forgetting. He charges, "Like all cultural generalizations, the notion that historical obsession is Ireland's special 'anomaly' [...] says a great deal more about the investments observers make in Irish culture than it does about that culture itself." Miller points out the biases and shortcomings of using "historical obsession" as a litmus test for authentic "Irishness." He argues that this culturally reductive stereotype is in fact,

one of those things "We Outsiders" need "We Irish" to have—like wit or whiskey—in order to make sense of what seems otherwise a profound and confounding strangeness. Seeing the Irish as unable to look back without staring is intellectually convenient not least because it bypasses a crucial examination of what is meant by "looking back" in the first place. One way to begin to understand the presence of the past in Irish experience without

resorting to cultural essentialism, then, is to examine memory itself as a cultural function. (11)

Using Miller's criteria, the relative scarcity of overt references to Irish history, places, people, and artifacts in Beckett's late drama is beside the point. What is more revealing is his trademark emphasis on memory as an interface between recovering the past and refashioning the present. Ronan McDonald puts it best when he observes that "what is, perhaps, more important than Beckett's memory of Irish geography is the Irish geography of Beckett's memory. The overt topographical references hint, more fundamentally, at the encoding of certain paradigms and models of Irish cultural and historical experience in Beckett's literary method" (142). McDonald focuses upon Edenic loss and tragic guilt as the shibboleths of post-Ascendancy drama. I would add memory as an essential part of the paradigm, serving as the vehicle, or the "cultural function," to use Miller's term, whereby characters return again and again to the scenes of their crimes, relapsing into unfortunate falls.

Though Beckett's art is overtly an "art of failure," he has at least been credited with success in freeing that art from the nightmare of history, flying past the nets of nationality, language, and religion notoriously set to ensnare Irish writers. The current trend to rehistoricize Beckett is built upon the premise that neither the author nor his work made it past those nets unscathed. After all, Beckett's flight to France followed a familiar migratory pattern of the Irish diaspora's wild geese. And his subsequent themes of disorientation, deracination, and marginalization are perfectly consistent with Protestant class anxieties in the postindependent Irish Free State.¹⁰ In my own study, only the chapter on *...but the clouds...* explores Beckett's work in a specifically Irish context, indebted as that play is to Yeats's work and iconic legacy. I focus more on tracing Beckett's lineage back to philosophy, psychology, premodernist art, and modernist aesthetics than back to Ireland per se. Nevertheless, if memory is a quintessentially modernist theme, it is no less Irish for that. In fact, Irish artists like W.B. and Jack B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett were instrumental in placing memory at the center of modernism. By drawing attention to Beckett's deeply reflexive interrogation of memory in the teleplays, I hope that my work contributes implicitly (when not explicitly) to the project of excavating Beckett's buried Irish inheritance.

* * *

While his Irish influences remain largely embedded, Beckett's philosophical and psychological influences loom closer to the surface. In terms of intellectual history the teleplays descend from a distinct "genealogy of memory." Most discussions of memory in Beckett begin with his treatment of the subject

in *Proust*. While I, too, will make select use of this revealing monograph, I am more interested in tracing the genealogy through which Beckett inherits, and from which he adapts, his dramaturgical approaches to memory. This lineage passes most notably through Arthur Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud. A complete analysis of Beckett's debt to these imposing figures is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter, but certain key intersections of thought on spirits, memory, and mourning must be established at the outset because of their foundational importance to the teleplays.

With regard to memory, Schopenhauer's most apposite influence on the teleplays comes in the relationship he draws between madness and memory. In *The World as Will and Representation*,¹¹ he identifies genius as a rare gift of deep perception and contemplation, but he also acknowledges how easily such gifts can deteriorate into madness. In an important passage from Book III, Schopenhauer diagnoses madness as essentially a failure of memory:

For the most part, mad people do not generally err in the knowledge of what is immediately *present*; their mad talk relates always to what is *absent* and *past*. [...] Therefore it seems to me that their malady specially concerns the *memory*. It is not, indeed, a case of memory failing them entirely. [...] Rather is it a case of the thread of memory being broken, its continuous connexion being abolished, and of the impossibility of a uniformly coherent recollection of the past. (192)

This irreparable rupture between the present and the past becomes a precondition for all the protagonists in the teleplays. But for Beckett's characters, as for Schopenhauer's madmen, the break with the past is never complete; otherwise the sufferer could simply lose himself in amnesiac oblivion. Instead, "Individual scenes of the past stand out correctly, just like the individual present; but there are gaps in their recollection that they fill up with fictions. [...] In his memory the true is forever mixed up with the false. Although the immediate present is correctly known, it is falsified through its fictitious connexion with an imaginary past" (192). Not only does this passage perfectly presage the "fictive power of memory" that Ackerley and Gontarski hail as the dominant theme of Beckett's late work, but the passage also defines a more general truth about the very nature of memory. Indeed, if forming a "fictitious connexion with an imaginary past" constitutes madness, then not only are all of the teleplay protagonists mad, but so too are most of their spectators. "We all are born mad," as Estragon would have it; "Some remain so" (*CDW* 75). In this sense Beckett departs from Schopenhauer's language of stigma and pathology and instead addresses the general tendency of memory to manipulate a malleable past. As Beckett first observed in his monograph on Proust, "Voluntary memory (Proust repeats it ad nauseam) is of no value

as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination or the caricature furnished by direct perception" (4). Rejecting both the veracity and the artistic usefulness of voluntary memory, Proust, Beckett the critic, and later Beckett the artist rely instead upon "involuntary memory" as a superior "instrument of discovery" (Proust 17). Paul de Man's insight in *Blindness and Insight* helps clarify this alternative focus even further. De Man observes, "The power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or a feeling that actually existed, but is a constitutive act of the mind bound to its own present and oriented toward the future of its own elaboration. The past intervenes only as a purely formal element" (92). In de Man's figuration, as in the teleplays, the past becomes merely incidental to the act of memory. To adapt Beckett's own language from the notes to *Film*, in any present act of memory, "No truth value attaches to [the past]"; rather, the past is "regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience" (163).

While *The World as Will and Representation* certainly casts a long shadow over Beckett's work, a touchstone text of even greater importance for the teleplays is Schopenhauer's later treatise, "Essay on Spirit Seeing and everything connected therewith." Given his willingness to categorize fictive memory as a symptom of madness in his masterwork, it is interesting to find Schopenhauer defending "spirit seeing" against charges of madness in this later essay. Instead he maps out a special category for internal perceptions (as distinct from external perceptions) and defines familiar phenomena within this category. He explains,

[T]he dream, somnambulistic perception, clairvoyance, vision, second sight, and possibly spirit seeing are closely related phenomena. Their common feature is that when we lapse into them, we obtain an intuitive perception that objectively presents itself through an organ quite different from that used in the ordinary state of wakefulness, that is to say, not through the external senses, but yet wholly and exactly as if by means thereof. I have accordingly called such an organ the *dream-organ*. (272)

"Dream-organ" activity is not confined exclusively, or even primarily, to perceptions made while asleep, however. Rather, Schopenhauer studies various perceptions provoked by internal stimulation (while awake or asleep) of our dream-organs, as related to, but distinct from, perceptions provoked by external stimulation of our sense organs. It is also important to note that Schopenhauer does not resort to the rhetoric of pathology in this essay; he does not privilege sense-organ perceptions over dream-organ perceptions, but simply recognizes them as two distinct categories of human cognition.