2013

Working on Film and Television

Graley Herren
Xavier University

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Recommended Citation
Herren, Graley, "Working on Film and Television" (2013). Faculty Scholarship. Paper 8.
http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/8

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As a fledgling writer, Samuel Beckett was himself a critic. He later downplayed his criticism to Ruby Cohn as 'more products of friendly obligations or economic necessity', dismissing the lot as 'disjecta' (D, 7). In the present context, however, it bears considering what 'residua' lingered on from his 'disjecta'. The critical frame of mind and interpretive strategies Beckett tested out during these formative years - rereading as occasion for reinvention - would develop into his signature methodology in the mature creative work. S. E. Gontarski identifies 'a central tenet of Samuel Beckett's creative spirit, a creative life marked by a series of reinventions, or better by a pattern of serial reinvention.' Gontarski refers primarily to Beckett's reinventions of personal and professional personae. I wish to expand the notion of 'serial reinvention' to characterise the work itself, as Beckett extended his oeuvre diachronically by excavating the synchronic strata of past works on which it was built. Beckett establishes a signature working method in his film and television plays whereby he returns to the past, not as homage or oath of allegiance but rather as creative leap-off point, as occasion for reinvention.

Nowhere is this methodology of serial reinvention displayed more graphically than in his corpus for film and television. Between 1963 and 1989, Beckett committed an enormous amount of creative energy to (re)conceiving and (re)producing work for the big and small screens. He composed original screenplays for one film - Film (1963) - and five television pieces - Eh Joe (1965), Ghost Trio (1975), ...but the clouds... (1976), Quad (1981) and Nacht und Träume (1982). He was also heavily involved in mounting screen productions, serving either as director, co-director or consultant to the director on Film (1964); four productions of Eh Joe [He Joe] [two in German (1966, 1979) and two in English (1966, 1989)]; two productions each of Ghost Trio [Geistertrio] [in English (1977) and German (1977)] and ...but the clouds... [...nur noch Gewölk...] [in English (1977) and German (1977)]; one production each of Quad [Quadrat I + II] [in German (1981)] and Nacht und Träume [in German (1983)]; a film adaptation of his stage play Play [Comédie] [in French (1966)]; and a television adaptation of his stage play What Where [Was Wo] [in German (1986)]. Important critical studies have placed Beckett's screen work firmly within the contexts of their media productions [primarily with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in England and Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) in West Germany]. Claes Zillichus initiated this effort with his seminal book Beckett and Broadcasting (1976), and Jonathan Bignell offers the most extensive evaluation of the institutional media contexts in which the screen work was originally conceived, produced and broadcast in his book Beckett on Screen (2009). Vital as the BBC context is to a full appreciation of the teleplays, however, Bignell concedes that these enigmatic experiments for the medium constitute aberrations to some degree: 'Beckett's television work and adaptations of his theatre plays became increasingly exceptional rather than typical, increasingly marginal rather than high-profile.' He adds, 'The plays, and Film too, look strikingly anachronistic in relation to the contexts in which I place them.'

Bignell's admirable study places Beckett's screen works within the important contexts of their institutional production at the BBC and their critical reception (or conspicuous lack thereof) in television studies. For my part, in what follows I concentrate on two other useful contexts which help account for the comparatively alien and anachronistic qualities of Beckett's film and television work. These pieces seem out of place because they are oriented steadfastly towards the past, engaged in dialectical reconsiderations - and reinventions - of a number of formative influences. Elsewhere I have elaborated at length upon important influences from and dialectical exchanges with literature (e.g. Dante, Shakespeare and Yeats), music (e.g. Beethoven and Schubert) and painting (e.g. the 'Agony in the Garden' tradition). In this chapter, I limit my focus to philosophical and psychological contexts for understanding the film and television plays. There is nothing new in looking at Beckett through these lenses, which are two of the more familiar disciplinary approaches in Beckett studies. But these perspectives are rarely applied to Beckett on screen (with the exception of Film), despite the fact that these works contain some of the most philosophically and psychologically suggestive works in his entire dramatic canon.

**PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXTS**

Beckett's earliest cinematic interest dates back to his youth. He was an early devotee of silent films, especially the comedies of Charlie Chaplin
and Buster Keaton. His early enthusiasm deepened, so much so that by early 1936 he had embarked upon an intensive self-directed study of film theory, culminating in an unsuccessful appeal to study under pioneering Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein at the Moscow State School of Cinematography. Beckett's first opportunity to work in cinema would only come from a piece of work, solicited and produced by his American publisher, Barney Rosset, for his fledgling Evergreen Theatre film project. During the summer of 1964, he made his first (and last) trip to the United States to collaborate with director Alan Schneider during the shooting of this (almost) silent film, starring screen legend Buster Keaton. Film must be regarded as only a qualified success — Beckett himself called it an 'interesting failure' — but it nevertheless demonstrates his commitment from the start to interrogating the philosophical nature of the medium.

BERKELEY: BEING AND PERCEPTION

Film examines the relationship of being and perception, taking its impetus from eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley, the Bishop of Cloyne. In The Principles of Human Knowledge, Bishop Berkeley divides all existence into two categories, sensible objects and spirits (or minds, or souls). For all objects, he asserts, 'esse est percipii' ['to be is to be perceived']; for all spirits, 'esse est percipere' ['to be is to perceive']. The published screenplay consists chiefly of Beckett's notes, diagrams, concerns and a summary of the action (there is no dialogue save for one whispered 'shh!'). There Beckett transcribes Berkeley's dictum, 'Esse est percipii', as well as his own disclaimer below: 'No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience' (CDW, 323). The dramatic conflict of Film derives from a tantalising loophole Beckett finds in Berkeley's perception-based thesis: if one can avoid all perception, might one then effectively cease to be? Beckett summarises the plot in one sentence: 'Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception' (CDW, 323).

GEULINCX: WITHDRAWAL INTO THE 'INNERMOST SANCTUM'

Though not acknowledged as overtly as Berkeley, another palpable philosophical influence in Film, and in the teleplays as well, is Arnold Geulincx. In his 1952 published screenplay consists chiefly of Beckett's notes, diagrams, concerns and a summary of the action (there is no dialogue save for one whispered 'shh!'). There Beckett transcribes Berkeley's dictum, 'Esse est percipii', as well as his own disclaimer below: 'No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience' (CDW, 323). The dramatic conflict of Film derives from a tantalising loophole Beckett finds in Berkeley's perception-based thesis: if one can avoid all perception, might one then effectively cease to be? Beckett summarises the plot in one sentence: 'Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception' (CDW, 323).

BERGSON: MEMORY AND HABIT

Once ensconced in their respective little sanctums, M and his televisual brethren habitually dwell upon their memories. Memory is the primary preoccupation of Beckett's late work, and that theme is developed with acute intensity on screen. The media of film and television lend themselves intrinsically to this theme because both function like memory itself. Actions registered as images are recorded and are thus made readily accessible and infinitely repeatable, reanimating the past and absent as if live and present. Yet these purportedly true images are subject to all manner of editorial manipulation, selection, condensation and distortion, resulting in sights and sounds that are less archival records from the past than expedient fantasies for the present — remembering as reinvention. The conceptual antecedents for Beckett's treatment of film and television as 'memory machines' can be traced back to theories of memory and habit articulated by modern French philosopher Henri Bergson. In Matter and Memory, Bergson posits a theoretical 'pure perception' that would collapse all meaningful distinctions between subject and object: 'let us place ourselves face to face with immediate reality: at once we find that there is no impassable barrier, no essential difference, no real distinction even, between perception and the thing perceived'. Practically speaking, however, one's confrontation with reality is always refracted through memory: 'In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using

What chiefly endured for Beckett from Geulincx was his acceptance of ignorance as the basic human condition, his ethic of humility and his advocacy for ascetic withdrawal and rigorous self-examination. Consider for instance Geulincx's promotion of diligence as 'an intense and continuous withdrawal of the mind (no matter what its current business) from external things into itself, into its own innermost sanctum, in order to consult the sacred Oracle of Reason'. This philosophical image most directly anticipates M's 'little sanctum' in '... but the clouds...', where he retreats from the world in order to summon his private oracle of his imagination, W (CDW, 419–22). In a broader sense, an 'innermost sanctum', into which one escapes from the world for the purposes of intense, imaginative, compulsive contemplation, serves ubiquitously as the serial precondition of Eh Joe, Ghost Trio, '... but the clouds... and Nacht und Träume.'
What we see is actually quite different. Within the brief span of twenty minutes, we see W appear on screen eight times, and always right on cue. His abject failure: W either appears only momentarily and then disappears, seemingly another ‘ten thousand years’ (K, 674), asymptotically wearing down, but seemingly never concluding.

Perhaps the best example of the distorted interplay between memory and habit appears in ... but the clouds.... M attempts nightly to conjure up the face and voice of W, a beloved woman he has lost from his past. But the teleplay sends very mixed signals about his success. M attests to his abject failure: W either appears only momentarily and then disappears, appears and briefly lingers, appears and lingers long enough to mouth out a few inaudible words or - ‘by far the commonest, in the proportion say of nine hundred and ninety-nine to one, or nine hundred and ninety-eight to two’ (CDW, 421) - fails to appear at all. Or so we are told. What we see is actually quite different. Within the brief span of twenty minutes, we see W appear on screen eight times, and always right on cue when summoned by M. Nevertheless, consider how she appears: faint, disembodied, blind and mute. He has learnt how to recollect her dependably from his memory, but through the mechanical transfer she is stripped of all the attributes that made her inspirational and worth summoning in the first place. In other words, she is reduced to a paltry simulacrum, and his efforts to apprehend her merely ‘habit interpreted by memory rather than memory itself’.

**Psychological Contexts**

**Freud: Mourning and Melancholia**

Beckett cited his father’s death as the impetus for seeking psychotherapy in the 1930s, so one can reasonably infer that working through this grief was one feature of his sessions with his therapist, Wilfred Bion. Be that as it may, there is no disputing the growing concern in his fiction and drama with loss, absence, longing, regret and the ever contentious interplay between the not-properly-born and the not-quite-dead. His treatment of these themes displays familiarity with Freud’s theories on mourning, first articulated in his seminal essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’. Freud distinguishes two general responses to the death of a loved one: normal mourning and melancholia. Initially the normal mourner and the melancholic subject exhibit similar symptoms, though melancholics additionally suffer from ‘self-reproaches and self-revilings’ and ‘a delusional expectation of punishment’. Through the psychological work of mourning, the normal mourner is eventually able to assimilate the loss, detach his libidinal connection with the lost love object and form new libidinal attachments; in laymen’s terms, he moves on and learns to love again. Not so for the melancholic. Owing to ambivalent feelings of both love and hate originally directed towards the lost object, the melancholic cannot reconcile himself to the loss. Instead, he effectively keeps the dead object alive – inside his ego. The internalisation process formulated in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ was pivotal to Freud’s formulation of the superego developed soon thereafter, and it would later prove instrumental to Melanie Klein’s object-relations theories. Freudian melancholia also provides a crucial subtext to Eb Joe.

Beckett’s first teleplay might just as well have been called ‘Night of the Living Dead’. Joe sits silently in his lonely room, where he is assailed by a feminine voice-over, simply labeled Voice in the script. She berates him for his infidelities, mocks his religious beliefs and finally captivates him with an excruciating description of the suicide of ‘the green one’, a former
lover who apparently killed herself after Joe jilted her. Voice identifies herself as another former lover, long since departed, who returns as the latest in a series of voices to haunt Joe:

You know that penny farthing hell you call your mind... That's where you think this is coming from, don't you... That's where you heard your father... Isn't that what you told me... Started in on you one June night and went on for years... On and off... Behind the eyes... That's how you were able to throttle him in the end... Mental thuggie you called it. [...] Then your mother when her hour came. [...] Others. All the others... Such love he got... God knows why... Pitying love... None to touch it... And look at him now... Throttling the dead in his head. (CDW, 362–3)

Voice's taunt that Joe only thinks these dead voices are emanating from his mind hints that the real story is more complicated than that. What we actually witness in Eb Joe amounts to a case study in chronic melancholia. Joe's relationships have always been tainted by ambivalence, 'Pitying love' as Voice puts it. Beginning with the primal loss of his father and mother, and continuing through the loss of several subsequent attachments, melancholic Joe cannot accept the loss of these ambivalent loves and instead incorporates them into his own self. Having relocated these lost objects internally, to what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, building upon Freud, call the subject's 'intrapsychic tomb', Joe is devoted paradoxically to murdering the undead he himself is responsible for keeping alive. Voice's verbal lacerations represent an ingenious dramatic correlative to the 'self-reproaches and self-revilings' of melancholia. Joe takes his sadistic impulses towards objects (father, mother, lovers) and redirects them inward just as Freud describes, persecuting himself through ventriloquism while sadistically throttling the dead in his head'.

Rank: Birth Trauma and Regression Fantasies

If Beckett means to recapitulate primary anxieties first encountered in earliest childhood, then, one might well ask, why are his characters so damned old? Perhaps this indicates the lifelong inability of these particular characters to come to terms with psychological dilemmas encountered from the beginning of life. Like May in Footfalls, whom Beckett characterised as having never been properly born, these haunted characters remain perpetually doomed to revolving but never resolving their primary anxieties. A still more severe diagnosis would be that primary anxiety is fundamentally insoluble: no one can ever truly resolve it because none of us was properly born. This is the central premise of Otto Rank's The Trauma of Birth, a highly influential book that Beckett studied in his 'Psychology Notes'. Rank posits that the first libidinal attachment stems from the physical attachment of the foetus to the mother in the womb. This original condition is perceived (if only in retrospect) as ideal, one of complete unity between subject and object in which all the needs of the foetus are perfectly satisfied. The forcible detachment from the mother during birth is thus perceived as a catastrophic eviction, the 'trauma of birth'. 'Birth was the death of him', as Beckett phrases it in A Piece of Monologue (CDW, 425). According to Rank, the lingering effects from this trauma, combined with regression fantasies of returning to the womb, dictate the terms for all the postnatal subject's deepest fears and desires: 'just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety of fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intraterine primal pleasure'.

Beckett himself claims to have recovered intraterine memories during his sessions with Bion, though his sensations contrast sharply with typical idealisations: "I used to lie down on the couch and try to go back in my past. [...] I certainly came up with some extraordinary memories of being in the womb. Intrauterine memories. I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out but no one could hear, no one was listening. I remember being in pain but being unable to do anything about it' (K, 177). One wonders whether these so-called memories reveal more about his postnatal ambivalence towards May Beckett than about his actual prenatal sensations. His personal associations with the intraterine condition certainly prefigure those of his young adulthood in Ireland — suffocation, imprisonment and helplessness — an inherited condition passed on to his brood of artistic creatures. Whereas Rank interprets the newborn's first cry (memorably featured in Beckett's Breath) as a howl of protest against the trauma of being born, for Beckett one's existence before birth is reckoned as no less traumatic. When Beckett appropriates images and ideas from Rank, as he frequently does in the teleplays, he does so in such a way that indulges regression fantasies only to expose how they ultimately exacerbate primal anxieties.

Beckett's works are commonly read in the context of after-life scenarios: hell, purgatory, urns, ghosts; my own emphasis on mourning is a variation on this same tendency. Less familiar, but no less valid, are the before-life connotations of several works, particularly among the late drama. If Eb Joe invites consideration in terms of the 'intrapsychic tomb', then Film, Ghost Trio, ... but the clouds... and Nacht und Träume equally suggest regression fantasies of the womb. The latter teleplay enacts a longing for maternal love and reunion with keen fervour. A Dreamer (A) is sequestered in a
dark room. There he hums, then sings, a line from Schubert's lied 'Nacht
und Träume' before falling asleep. In his dream, his dreamt self (B) is
nurtured by a pair of helping hands: they wipe his brow with a cloth, give
him sup from a cup and embrace him. In a repetition of the dream, the
entire sequence is repeated, but even slower and in close-up, heightening
the sense of longing (CDW, 465-6). While the teleplay is undoubtedly
replete with religious and artistic connotations, there is no denying the
primal urges for maternal affection: the dreamt self gazes upward at an
'invisible face' (CDW, 466), and this hovering presence provides him with
sustenance, swaddles him and hugs him. The verse sung from Schubert,'Holde
Kinder träum, kehret wieder! [Sweet dreams, come back again!] further
reinforces the regression fantasy of reuniting with the idealised primal
love object.

Serial variations on the same dynamic are apparent in all of the film and
television plays (with the exception of the always exceptional Quad). In
Film, for instance, Beckett specifies that O retreats to 'his mother's room'
(CDW, 332). The 'familiar chamber' of P in Ghost Trio (CDW, 408) is also
highly suggestive of the womb, particularly as he keeps thinking he hears
a woman's voice emanating from somewhere nearby outside his shelter. In
this context it is also tantalising to read the long corridor connecting the
'familiar chamber' to the outside world as analogous to the birth canal,
especially when it is navigated by a 'small boy' with 'hood glistening'
(CDW, 413) like a newborn's caul. Both the setting and actions in ...but the
clouds... previously considered from a Geulincxian perspective, equally sup-
port an intrauterine interpretation. In fact, M's description of his 'begging
of the mind' while enclosed in his sanctum strongly echoes Beckett's own
memories from the womb: 'Then crouching there, in my little sanctum, in
the dark, where none could see me, I began to beg, of her, to appear, to me'
(CDW, 420). Finally, M's language in describing his exit from the sanctum
is pregnant with the labour of (re)birth: 'until the time came, with break of
day, to issue forth again, void my little sanctum' (CDW, 421-2).

As for the viability of maintaining these regression fantasies, or the con-
solation they ultimately provide, Joe's Voice can speak for them all: 'Cut a
long story short doesn't work' (CDW, 366). O's flight from perception is
thwarted, F's anticipated reunion never materialises and M's habitual con-
juring tricks only yield ephemeral glimpses of the elusive woman he seeks.
Even in the most indulgent of the fantasies, Nacht und Träume, where a
maternal presence does seem to arrive and accommodate all the subject's
basic needs, the dream fades away in the end, proving its illusory nature
and leaving the Dreamer not reunited in the idealised womb but alone
again in his dark and empty room. The pattern of regressive retreat in
these works only serves to trigger primal anxieties rather than alleviate
them. Rank speaks to this dynamic in his consideration of the common
childish fear of a dark room. Likewise for Beckett's screen protagonists,
the retreat into the room as fantasized re-enactment of regression into the
womb proves futile, only throwing their suffering into sharper relief. Just
as the screen works consistently depict the failure of memory, they also
depict, in what amounts to much the same thing, the failure of fantasy.
This failure is many-layered, stemming from the irrepressibility of the
external world, the inescapability of self-perception and the irreversibility
of the birth trauma. But for Beckett, contra Rank, the failure of the regres-
sion fantasies also stems from the unwelcome discovery that, far from 'an
experience of extreme pleasure', the womb may have been a miniature
torture chamber wherein the foetus was familiarised with proto-traumas
in preparation for the traumatic life to come.

NOTES

1. Beckett's one full-length critical monograph was Proust, originally published
by Chatto and Windus in 1937. He also published numerous occasional pieces of
criticism on art and literature, gathered together as Disjecta: Miscellaneous
2. S. E. Gontarski, 'Introduction', in S. E. Gontarski (ed.) A Companion to
3. Jonathan Bignell, Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays (Manchester: Manchester
University Press, 2009), 8.
4. Ibid., 20.
5. For my extended studies of each film and television plays, originals and adap-
tations, see Graley Herren, Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television (New
a consideration of the influence of film theorists Eisenstein, Pudovkin and
Arnheim on Beckett's Film, see Matthias Engberink, 'Film and Film: Beckett
and Early Film Theory', in Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani (eds.) Beckett
at 100: Revolving It All (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 152-65.
7. Maurice Harmon (ed.), No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel
van Ruler, Anthony Uhlmann, and Martin Wilson (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2006
[1675]), 339.
9. Ibid., 526, my emphasis.
11 Ibid., 24.

12 Geulincx addresses habit most directly in his section and annotations on 'Disposition', where he asserts that 'to do something easily [Beckett's emphasis in his notes] is not necessarily to do good, nor is to be accustomed to do something necessarily to do good.... And what further proof do we need that the nature of Virtue is not derived from disposition?' (319). In the same annotation, Geulincx remonstrates, 'Familiarity, or love of the commonplace, are passions by which the greater part of the vulgar are continually moved' (319).

13 Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory, 95.


16 During rehearsals for his 1976 Schiller-Theater Werkstatt production of Tritte (Footfalls) in Berlin, Beckett compared May to one of Carl Jung's patients. Directorial assistant Walter Asmus reports Beckett's exchange with actress Hildegard Schmahl: 'In the thirties, he says, C.G. Jung, the psychologist, once gave a lecture in London and told of a female patient who was being treated by him. Jung said he wasn't able to help this patient and for this, according to Beckett, he gave an astonishing explanation. This girl wasn't living. She existed but didn't actually live. According to Beckett, this story had impressed him very much at the time'. Knowlson identifies this lecture given on 2 October 1935, the third in a series delivered by Jung at the Tavistock Clinic in London, which Beckett attended with his therapist, Wilfred Bion (K, 170).

In the discussion period after the lecture, Jung said of this patient, who died young, 'she had never been born entirely' (C. G. Jung, Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice (The Tavistock Lectures) (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 107). Beckett alludes even more directly to Jung's memorable comment in All That Fall (CDW, 196).