

Beckett on Film: A dialogue amongst cinema, television and theatre*

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Abstract

The Beckett on Film project was a co-production involving the Irish public television channel RTÉ, Channel 4, Irish Film Board and the production company Blue Angel for the adaptation to the cinema and posterior broadcasting on television of all 19 plays written by Samuel Beckett. Many renowned cinema directors, such as Anthony Minghella, Conor McPherson, Neil Jordan, Enda Hughes, Atom Egoyan, Damien O'Donnell amongst others, were invited to propose their adaptation of a play. However, the Beckett Estate imposed some conditions to the adaptations, which challenged directors' creati-

vity to create new visual metaphors from the theatre language.

The project raised some very interesting questions, which I will discuss in this paper. Firstly, these audiovisual products bring a new understanding of Beckett's works to new generations as they become more popular and accessible. These audiovisual works also contribute to enlarge the critical scope of Beckett's oeuvre, as they highlight the use of technology to represent memory and time, important themes both for Beckett and film studies.

Secondly, I will point out the importance of cinema and television convergence in the beginning of the 21st century and the creation of a new audiovisual space that promotes dialogue amongst various media and stimulates the development of European audiovisual industry.

1 The Project

The Beckett on Film project, premiered in 2001, consists of the intersemiotic translation to cinema and posterior broadcasting on television of all 19 plays written by Samuel

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Beckett. They were first produced in 1991 by the Gate Theatre Dublin for the Beckett Festival and were exhibited along with Beckett's radio plays. Due to the great success on the stages of London, New York and Melbourne, Michael Colgan, the Gate Theatre artistic director, and Alan Moloney from Blue Angel Films, proposed the realization of the project to the Irish public radio and television network, RTÉ to be produced in partnership with Channel 4 and The Irish Film Board.

This project raises a controversial discussion in relation to both Beckett's artistic creation and the critic of his oeuvres. Beckett only allowed very few adaptations of his works to different media, as he thought that the medium is so important for the performance that the adaptation would not express its essence. In 1963, the French television RTF adapted the radio play *All That Fall*, translated by Beckett himself into French with the title *Tous Ceux Qui Tombent*, and directed by Robert Pinger. Beckett was very unsatisfied with the production because "it was a play for voices and not bodies", and it would not work in a medium that shows the characters. For Beckett, "to act is to kill it"¹. After watching the adaptation, Beckett² wrote to his Curtis Brown's agent, John Barber, saying that he allowed the French television to adapt *All That Fall* in a weak moment and it was a disaster. Then, when Ingmar Bergman asked for permission to adapt the radio plays *All That Fall* and *Embers* to cinema, Beckett refused.

¹ KNOWLSON, J. *Damned to fame. The life of Samuel Beckett*. Londres: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997, p. 505.

² KNOWLSON, J. *Damned to fame. The life of Samuel Beckett*. Londres: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997, p. 779.

However, Beckett was very interested in the audiovisual media, in 1938 he even wrote a letter to the Russian master Sergei Eisenstein requesting to study cinema with him but never got a reply. He wrote and directed many audiovisual works, in 1963 he wrote the script of his only film entitled *Film*, which was performed by Buster Keaton and directed by Alan Schneider. He also wrote radio and television plays for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and directed them for the German television *Süddeutscher Rundfunk*.

Many authors argue that the plays creative processes were influenced by the teleplays written and produced in the same period, in the same manner that the television plays creative processes were influenced by *Film*. When working on television, Beckett had the possibility to enhance his minimalist vision and explore the fragmentation of characters' bodies in a way that would not be possible in theatre, but at the same time he innovated the theatrical language from what he learned with his experimentations on television.

Considering that all 19 plays were written in English and French over 31 years of work, it is possible to perceive the development of a poetics, which embraces what Beckett considered to be both aspects of the cancer of time: habit and its subsequent repetition, and memory related to human ageing and mortality. It is presented through a constant process towards minimalization and abstraction, with regards to stage setting, lighting, characters performance and narrative.

The stage settings present only a few props and do not represent a defined space for the action in a realistic or naturalistic sense. The stage setting of *Happy Days* (written in

1961), for instance, presents the protagonist Winnie buried in a mount of sand up to her waist in the first act and up to her neck in the second one. Most of the time, the actors' performances are emphasized through the use of spotlights surrounded by darkness. The characters of *Play* (written in 1962-3) are positioned inside urns and only their heads can be seen focused on the spotlights. In *Rockaby* (written in 1980), there is only a rock chair, on which W sits, and in *Footfalls* (written in 1975), just the phantasmagoric figure of May is lit while she walks from one side of the stage to the other.

The narratives of the plays are not based on the Aristotelian unity of action, with beginning, middle and end and they are cyclic as, for instance, in *Play*. In the same manner, the dialogues do not correspond to actions such as it appears in *Waiting for Godot* (written in 1953) and the characters present themselves immobilized. In fact, the whole idea of drama as a mimetic representation of reality is questioned when the imitation of an action becomes the proper theme of the play.

Therefore, the adaptation of Beckett's plays by renowned cinema directors embodies the dialogue between theatre, cinema and television, challenges directors' creativity and presents a new understanding of Beckett's poetics.

2 Challenges of Production

The Beckett Estate, which holds the copyright of Beckett's works, imposed many conditions to the plays footage. The criteria to select directors requested previous experience as writers and they would have to agree not to change the author's instructions of the performances. On the other hand, they

had total freedom to choose the casting, as the producers hoped they would hire renowned actors and actresses with whom they had worked before in order to add credibility and prestige to the project.

Colgan³ reports that a "bible" was written for the directors with categorical instructions: cuts in the text and gender definition were not allowed. For instance, if "beach" were written on the script, there had to be a beach, as adaptations or scenes inspired in other authors, or even in Beckett's other texts, would not be accepted. The challenge was to adapt an unaltered theatrical text to the screen, using only audiovisual medium resources, that is, camera movements, framing, editing, sound effects and lighting.

The translation of a text from one sign system to another may preserve its main characteristics, which Santiago⁴ nominates as the "prison-form" in literature. However, the translated text has to be an aesthetic text independent from the original. In the case of theatre, not only texts with monologues and dialogues are part of this "prison-form" but also scenes instructions, which build the action visualized by the author. Ramos⁵ points out that instructions and dialogues have equal importance in Beckett's plays composition and if they were not respected, the performance and the meaning of the play could be jeopardized.

³ COLGAN, M. Beckett on film website. [En línea]. Dublin: Blue Angels Films, 2001. <<http://www.beckettonfilm.com>> [Consult: 25th April 2005]

⁴ JOHNSON, R. *Literatura e cinema. Macunaíma: do modernismo na literatura ao cinema novo*. São Paulo: T.A. Queiroz, Editor, 1982, p. 10.

⁵ RAMOS, L. F. *O parto de Godot e outras encaixas imaginárias: a rubrica como poética da cena*. São Paulo: Hucitec\Fapesp, 1999, p. 77.

During the performance, the written theatrical text becomes oral and corporal communication, in which the presence of the body is indispensable to the space of fiction⁶. This space of fiction built by the actor is denominated theatricality and it presents itself in a new and different form in each performance. Yet, it only happens effectively if the audience knows of it, that is, the performance requires one to perform and one to watch it.

In the footage, the image captured from the performance presents a fragmented space of fiction and intermediates the presence of the actor. In addition, the editing can reorganize the temporal linearity in its own way and preserve it *ad infinitum*. The stage, as a medium, provides the space amongst three walls, lighting and sound for live performance, while the audiovisual medium presents the space through camera angles, movements and frames to emphasize gestures and expressions of characters performance. In addition, audio, lighting and editing can reconfigure performances' space and time.

Certainly Beckett subverted the rules of what was considered as theatrical drama in the 1950's. Moreover, his works express a dialogue amongst media perceived in his own creative process, which includes references and experimentations using resources from different media, and in the intersemiotic translation of his works for cinema and television. However, the question is whether the Beckett on Film project manages to transpose theatrical language singularities to the medium of film and moreover, to what extent the films build new visual

metaphors through the use of camera movements, lighting, sound effects and editing. It seems that directors' creativity was one of the main points of the project's success, as some plays suited very well the specificities of the audiovisual language, especially, considering the use of both camera and sound resources.

3 The Films

The films were released in cinema festivals all around the world and received very good appraisal from public and critics. As many of them were shorts films, they were broadcast together with directors' interviews in special programmes on television. All the 19 films and interviews are available on a DVD box along with the documentary "Check the Gate: Putting Beckett on Film", a stills gallery with commentary and a souvenir programme. However, it is important to bear in mind that, although films were very well received by cinema viewers, when they were broadcast on television the audience rates were so low that some channels did not show all of them. Yet, in 2002, the Beckett on Film project was awarded the Best TV Drama at the South Bank Award Ceremony.

Another aspect to be considered is that Beckett's works explore the medium of cinema, as they experiment with technology to represent memory and time. The film *Play*, directed by Anthony Minghella, was appraised by critics, mainly because of its fast editing of interchanging monologues and its use of the camera as an audiovisual tool to express the power of the play spotlights. The camera acts as an element that provokes the three talking heads, W1 (Kristin Scott-Thomas), W2 (Juliet Stevenson) and

⁶ ZUMTHOR, P. *Performance, Recepção, Leitura*. São Paulo: Educ, 2000, p. 45-50.

M (Alan Rickman), buried in the urns. The film of *Krapp's Last Tape* (written in 1958) was directed by Atom Egoyan and presented as protagonist John Hurt, an Irish actor who performed several of Beckett's plays. In this film, Egoyan used the audiovisual technology to enrich the contrast between memory and recorded memory and to question the human incapacity to communicate. The use of lighting and Hurt's performance favour the film, which also originated an installation entitled "Steenbeckett" (2002) in the Museum of Mankind in London. Nevertheless, both *Play* and *Krapp's Last Tape* have far too many props, which pollute Beckett's minimalist universe. *Play*'s setting appears to be a Dantesque cemetery and *Krapp's Last Tape*'s an office loaded with books and old materials.

The film of *Act Without Words II* (written in 1956), directed by Enda Hughes, used the film reel as a metaphor of the action, presenting itself as one of the most creative pieces, as it managed to translate all the mime and grace of characters A and B to the audiovisual medium. *Not I* (written in 1972), which was originally translated by Beckett himself for the BBC in the 1980's, was directed by Neil Jordan and performed by Julianne Moore as the verborragic Mouth. Newspapers' critics acclaimed it, but it is not as interesting as Beckett's adaptation as it has the beauty of a glamorous and perfect mouth instead of the scatological mouth proposed by Beckett.

That Time (written in 1974-5) was directed by Charles Garrad, featuring Niall Buggy as the face of A, B and C surrounded by spotlights, which represents the memory of different periods in the life of a man. The film of *Ohio Impromptu* (written in 1981) was interpreted by Jeremy Irons as Reader and Lis-

tener and directed by Charles Sturridge. Listener once loved Reader, who is a mysterious messenger of someone already dead.

In the films of *That Time*, *Ohio Impromptu* and *What Where* (written in 1983) the same actor interpreted different roles. In these cases, audiovisual technology was very useful to follow Beckett's specific instruction to use actors as alike as possible. In a post *Star Trek* atmosphere, unlike Beckett's proposal, *What Where* was shot in a kind of futuristic library with letters printed on walls. This film, which was also adapted by Beckett for the German television *Süddeutscher Rundfunk* in 1986, was appraised by public and critics, mainly for the modernity of the theme that questions the control society we live in, and the performance of Scottish actor Gary Lewis in the roles of Bim, Bem and Bom. It was adapted by the acclaimed director of the film *East is East* (1999), which won the BAFTA award for Best British Film, Damien O'Donnell.

Despite the fact that a few of Beckett's scholars have not approved this project because Beckett often prohibited adaptations of his plays, it is important to bear in mind that these films became a paradigm in the studies of his works. The new generations will have a different perspective of Beckett's theatrical and audiovisual works. If on one hand the performance liveness, so characteristic of the theatrical language, is lost; on the other hand, the texts become more accessible and popular when they are broadcast in a medium that reaches millions of people. Therefore, the Beckett on Film project not only enlarges the critical scope of Beckett's oeuvre at the beginning of a new century, in which the way of understanding the world and analysing art changed radically in con-

sequence of the development of new technologies, but also highlights some possibilities with regards to the convergence amongst various media.

In Great Britain, Channel 4 has encouraged the innovation and experimentation in the form and content of its programmes and has been responsible for the convergence between the so-called quality television and art house cinema since its foundation in 1982. The channel can finance up to 95% of its programmes or films and runs their distribution and divulgation. During the 1990's, independent production companies began to produce 25% of the programmes, which motivated the substitution of TV programmes for films, as these were cheaper and had more appeal in the international market.

This convergence promoted the enlargement of an audiovisual space that creates films and programmes for domestic and international markets, the aesthetic proposals of which push the boundaries of each medium that nurtures them. This has been a tendency in the British market since the 1990's, which the Irish market has also adopted recently focusing on the divulgation of Irish language and culture. It seems to be an effective way for art house cinema and public television to survive the competition of satellite and cable channels in recent years.

In this respect, the development of the digital format will also contribute to the enlargement of the audiovisual space, providing extra materials and promoting the debate about this new aesthetic language. Therefore, the Beckett on Film project is inserted in this audiovisual system in terms of production, distribution and also with regards to experimentation with different aesthetic lan-

guages, such as theatrical, cinematic, televisual and digital.

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