Screen and stage space in Beckett's theatre plays on television

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Theatre plays written by Samuel Beckett that have been adapted for television need to be understood in the historical contexts of their production and broadcast. While they can be situated as adaptations of theatre plays, the significance of the adaptation in each case is determined by the changing relationships to original television plays, to conceptions of television authorship, to the aesthetics of original or adapted drama on television in terms of *mise-en-scène* and performance, and to broadcasters’ perceptions of what their audiences want (Bignell 2009). Such a constellation of questions about the adaptation of a theatre play for television can be productively addressed by focusing on spatiality, or how space is related to meaning. Theatre staging is necessarily transformed spatially for presentation on screen. Thinking about space in this context includes assessing whether a theatre production has been ‘opened out’ by adding new scenes or shooting in a variety of locations. The opportunities for changing how performance and setting are arranged for the camera also draw attention to the framing and composition of the two-dimensional television image. Shots can be close-up, relationships between foreground and background can be manipulated by depth-of-focus techniques, and the relative positions of performer and other objects in the frame can be changed by camera movement. The pace and tone of adapted theatre plays on television are also crucially dependent on editing, which creates relationships between one camera shot and the next in ways that are not possible on stage.

In addressing the spatial realization of Beckett’s plays, this chapter combines work on archival sources, brief *mise-en-scène* analysis of the audiovisual detail of plays as broadcast and discussion of audience responses. The chapter begins with arguments about the significance of authorship in Beckett’s involvement with television adaptations, since his authorial status and directorial track-record in theatre impacted on the adaptation of his stage plays. Working relationships with television directors, actors and production staff involved in adaptations of his work were also

significant, since Beckett often collaborated closely with them and his agency had enabling and constraining effects. Adaptations of Beckett's theatre plays were commissioned and responded to in relation to categories such as high-profile authored drama, arts programming, educational television and 'star' performance—so, within television, they were also situated in multiple ways. For television professionals, viewers and critics, television versions of Beckett's theatre plays could be positioned and understood in a range of different categories and as a consequence they offered a variety of pleasures.

While some analysis of television and film adaptations of Beckett's work has been carried out with attention to their aesthetic, thematic and historical development (for example, Herren 2007: 171-97), spatiality has not been central to the largely text-based tradition of Beckett scholarship. This chapter offers a brief case study of the earliest British television adaptation of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1963) as well as a more recent 2007 version in order to analyse the television studio as, and in contrast to, a theatrical space. In both cases a three-sided set was left open on its fourth side, producing an imaginary separation of audience space from stage space. Similarly frontal modes of address can be seen in the short film adaptation of Beckett's *Comédie* [*Play*] (dir. Marin Karmitz, 1966), and television adaptations of his *Not I* (BBC2, 1975) and *Was Wo* [*What Where*] (Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR), 1986). Each of these Beckett adaptations negotiate between a form of staging that derives from theatre, where cameras are on the edges of the acting area and look into it, and the penetration and segmentation of the performance space that results from moving the cameras into the space and alternating their different points of view. Television adaptations of Beckett's work move between apparent acceptance of perceived boundaries between theatre and television, and acknowledgement of the porosity of those boundaries. In this respect the television adaptations have much in common with the five original dramas that Beckett wrote for television (Bignell 2009), in which there are occasional elements specific to television production (like the use of videographic effects) but also a highly theatrical presentation of a single, interior performance space.

Authorship and the spaces of transnational adaptation

As a living writer, Beckett had a much greater role in the adaptations of his plays than is usual for the dominant form of television adaptation in Britain, namely the episodic

serial adaptation of the 'classic' novel. The notion of the 'classic' signals the enduring cultural and commercial life of a text that is part of an educational, literary canon (Cardwell 2002; Giddings and Selby 2001; Giddings and Sheen 2000). Novelists whose work has been adapted for television have most often been those writing in the 1840-1940 period, with canonical figures such as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy predominant. There is an expectation that the adaptations will be 'faithful' to the writer's work, which means adopting the main characters, setting and storyline of the source text, along with its dominant tone (for example, melodramatic, satirical or comic). But, nevertheless, it is the adaptor responsible for writing the screenplay used for the television production who has the role of creative originator and who, in some cases (notably Andrew Davies), becomes as much an anchoring 'brand' as the novelist whose work he or she transforms. In contrast, television versions of 'classic' theatre plays by William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw or Henrik Ibsen—the three most adapted playwrights for television in the twentieth century (N. Taylor 1998: 34-5)—had no credited adaptor in most cases and the originating creator of the television programme was assumed to be the director or producer.

Beckett was situated between the two creative roles of originating author and adaptor, and thus in an unusual and interesting position. His dialogue was not modified to any extent when scripting adaptations, which thus potentially signals a lack of involvement in the adaptation process rather similar to the role of 'classic' novel writers. But, on the other hand, as a director himself and a frequent collaborator on theatre productions, Beckett shared some of the creative primacy that the television director would have had. For example, when Donald McWhinnie was intending to produce a new adaptation of Beckett's *Play* for BBC television in 1976, he asked Beckett for directorial suggestions, and Beckett replied with the idea that close-ups should always be of the three speakers' faces together and not separately. The play was shot following this advice but never broadcast because Beckett did not like the lighting.[1] Beckett had authority as the creator of the adapted work, and used it to influence aesthetic choices that were normally under the control of the director.

The producer of an adaptation customarily makes budgetary and casting decisions but is not necessarily involved in creative discussions with the author of the source text. Beckett, however, had a high public profile and his approval of an adaptation could be made public, to validate it and promote it to the television

audience. This was the case, for example, when *Radio Times* described a repeat screening of the 1977 BBC adaptation of *Not I* on BBC2 in 1982: 'In one of the most extraordinary pieces of modern drama Billie Whitelaw, Beckett's foremost interpreter, performs this astonishing tour de force. *Not I*—the mouth suspended in space, caused a sensation when it was first performed at the Royal Court in 1973. Beckett himself is a great admirer of this television version.'[2] Again, Beckett was in an unusual position as a living writer whose ideas, and personal connections with performers, directors and other broadcasting staff could be harnessed to assist the producer.

Because of his close relationships with television producers and directors who in many cases knew him or had directed his work on stage in the UK, Germany or the USA, Beckett was usually willing to offer advice about the plays or co-direct them for the screen. He had strong views about how his work should be realised. For example, he had pre-production discussions about the play's realisation with the director slated to work on the first television version of *Krapp*, Prudence Fitzgerald, because he had disliked the set for a 1961 BBC adaptation of *Waiting for Godot*, a now lost version that seems to have been shot on videotape.[3] Shortly thereafter, Harry Moore, story editor of the BBC's *Festival* series that specialized in television adaptations of modern theatre, went to Paris in February 1964 to discuss television projects with Beckett (as well as to meet Jean Genet, Marguerite Duras and others). Moore reported back on his visit, referring to Beckett's dislike of the BBC's 1963 adaptation of *Krapp's Last Tape* in which, Beckett felt, his advice to Fitzgerald had not been followed.[4] Beckett's views about previous and putative adaptations had a strong influence on what was made and how it was staged for the camera.

For Beckett's collaborators, adapting his work offered both opportunities and constraints. His plays have small casts, single settings and were suitable for shooting in the controlled environment of the television studio. They could feature performances by well-known theatre actors: the producer of the 1961 BBC version of *Waiting for Godot*, Donald McWhinnie, reunited Peter Woodthorpe and Timothy Bateson, the first actors to play Estragon and Lucky in the English-language première of the play directed by Peter Hall in London in 1955. On the other hand, each Beckett play was a one-off programme, so costs could not be spread across a continuing series using the same cast and crew. The plays are of unusual lengths and so are hard to schedule; their slow pace—with almost no physical action and a bare, almost

unchanging setting throughout—required the audience to give sustained attention to the details of their language and performance. On the one hand, this focus on performance was an opportunity to showcase the actors' work, but inasmuch as television marked its difference from theatre by using location settings, for example, and editing camera shots to build dramatic sequences, Beckett's plays are not 'televisual'.

The production process of *Shades*—an hour-long edition of *The Lively Arts* which offered a compilation of three Beckett plays, BBC2, 17 April 1977—gives a detailed insight into how Beckett's work was perceived.[5] The BBC producer Tristram Powell had started to research a possible Beckett anniversary television programme for the *Second House* arts series in late 1975. Beckett was renowned as a novelist and poet as well as a playwright, but Powell prioritised performances of Beckett's theatre plays as the means to present his work to the television audience. He considered making short feature items for his programme, to include material about *Not I* and *Waiting for Godot*, and interviews with Beckett, the director Donald McWhinnie and actors including Billie Whitelaw, Nicol Williamson, Patrick Magee, John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson, each of whom had taken leading roles in London theatre productions of Beckett's plays. Powell made lists of Beckett productions in the USA and France as well as in Britain to identify which ones had been recorded previously, and listed original plays with adaptations, and radio drama alongside television drama. Beckett's authorship was the unifying principle.

Television adaptation of Beckett's theatre plays exists in a transnational context and a Beckett 'brand' formed a locus for cooperation between nationally-specific television production and reception cultures. Just as Beckett had an international reputation as a dramatist, and an international network of collaborators, television adaptations of his theatre plays travelled abroad in a way that was comparable to touring theatre productions. Television adaptations made in Germany for SDR were acquired by BBC for broadcast in Britain, and the BBC's own adaptations were broadcast in Germany. The Swiss-German television financier and distributor Reiner Moritz co-produced Powell's BBC2 programme *Shades* (1977), and BBC television acquired the American documentarists D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus's film of a 1981 New York theatre performance of Beckett's *Rockaby* (1982). Such exchanges and partnerships continued after Beckett's death, when the *Beckett on Film* project (2000) brought actors and directors from the UK, Ireland,

USA and continental Europe together to adapt for the screen all nineteen of Beckett's theatre plays, some of them using the same cast and director from the Dublin theatre festivals of Beckett's work in 1999 (Frost and McMullan 2003). Irish and British television channels and arts institutions invested in the films, thus acquiring the rights to screen them and distribute them internationally. It is clear that Beckett adaptations exist in transnational networks of production and distribution organised around his authorship, and those networks have their own dynamics of finance and power.

Theatre on television

In a wide-ranging critical review of the field, Thomas Leitch (2008) notes that the great majority of adaptation scholarship has focused on how novels have been adapted into films, and that the methodologies for analysing television adaptations of theatre are under-developed. As Billy Smart (2010) has shown, studies by Roger Manvell (1979) or Egil Tornqvist (1999) are both partial and schematic, tending to essentialize the mediums and focus on one form or period of text. The legacy of semiology (see Esslin 1987, Aston and Savona 1991, Pavis 1991, Fische-Lichte 1992), however, does helpfully link theatre and screen adaptation around the significance of directorial decisions. On television, camera point-of-view and editing shape where the viewer can look and thus how moments of action are perceived. In theatre the spectator can view the playing space as a whole, inasmuch as it is made visible by lighting and placement of set elements, whereas television adaptation can withhold knowledge of the space of the fictional world, and also alter and relocate it. Spatial realization is the joining and separating hinge between theatre and its television adaptation.

Twentieth-century television adaptations of Beckett's theatre work were recorded in studios, in long takes with few cuts: their form therefore associates them with theatre's sequential, continuous performance. In a homage to the respective French and British premières of *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* (1953 and 1955 respectively), the BBC's 1961 television version opened with the three knocks on the stage floor that traditionally precede curtain-up in French theatre and, as noted above, was cast with the same lead actors who first played the tramps Estragon and Vladimir on the London stage.[6] BBC adaptations of *Krapp* appeared in the *Festival* and *Thirty Minute Theatre* series of television dramas in 1963 and 1972 respectively, each of which centred on adapted works rather than original plays for television.

When the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) non-commercial channel in the US first screened the *Beckett on Film* (2000) series, the plays were shown in the channel's *Stage on Screen* (2000-1) slot, produced by the New York television station WNET. *Stage on Screen* showed television and film adaptations of theatre plays, documentaries about plays and playwrights, and occasional television relays of live theatre. As this chapter explores further below, the BBC discourse promoting Beckett's work on television in Britain, and adhered to by contemporary commentators who discussed his work in reviews, regarded Beckett's theatre plays on television as an extension of his theatre writing. The form, personnel and approach to adapting Beckett's theatre work for the television medium have been chosen in ways that pay due respect to its stage origins, rather than occluding them.

However, Beckett's work did not appear in the most prominent and longest-running British series of theatre adaptations—namely, *World Television Theatre* (BBC, 1957-9), *Play of the Month* (BBC1, 1965-83), *Theatre Night* (BBC2, 1985-90) or *Performance* (BBC2, 1991-8). These anthologies comprised adaptations of plays mostly written by canonical early modern dramatists including Shakespeare and twentieth-century authors such as George Bernard Shaw, Noel Coward, J. B. Priestley and Terence Rattigan. Such plays were understood to be 'accessible' to large television audiences, whereas a feature in the BBC's listings magazine *Radio Times* advertising a production of Beckett's *Eh Joe* (BBC2, 1966) acknowledged that his work might seem unappealing to viewers, saying of Beckett's theatre plays: 'They are bizarre, with their endlessly arguing tramps and their families imprisoned in dustbins, and they express a philosophy which many people find unrelievedly bleak' (Anon. 1966). Although Peter Luke's *Festival* series (1963-4) was the home for an adaptation of *Krapp*, its 'high cultural' ambitions and small audiences led to the series' cancellation. It was in arts programmes that television versions of Beckett's theatre plays were screened, rather than series of theatre adaptations.

Adaptations of theatre plays have been regarded pejoratively as 'theatrical' rather than 'televisual' in aesthetic form (Gardner and Wyver 1983). Much of this criticism is based on spatial considerations, since adaptations have been seen as imperfect reproductions of performances intended for another medium, constrained by the television studio. The orthodoxy has been that television develops historically away from the derivative and constrained form of the adapted play, shot live (or as-if-live) in the studio, and towards original drama for television, frequently shot with film

cameras on location and structured by editing in post-production. It should, however, be acknowledged that this developmental model has also been subject to a more nuanced critique (Macmurraugh-Kavanagh and Lacey 1999).

Paradoxically, adaptations of Beckett's plays take advantage of factors commonly viewed as constraints on adaptation. The conventional way of producing adaptations was to map the spatial dynamics of the theatre stage onto the bounded space of the studio, without introducing the multiple, exterior spaces that location filming allowed (Ridgman 1998). The form of performance that this spatial restriction encouraged centres on the contribution of the actor, in negotiation with the specific details of setting and point of view that the restricted space makes more prominent. Both John Adams (1998) and John Caughie (2000) have outlined this highly detailed performance aesthetic, characterized by gestural nuance and intense work on the dialogue. Beckett's nuanced and highly deliberate speech made these demands on actors, and made it more attractive for producers and directors of Beckett adaptations to draw their performers from theatre productions.

This expectation of a television aesthetic derived from theatre can be seen in Powell's planning for the Beckett anniversary tribute programme *Shades* (1977).[7] He expected to use two sets, one of which would be a black empty space and the other dressed to represent a derelict room. The first of these suggests the 'black box' style of theatre presentation, using minimal sets and props, that had become increasingly accepted since the early 1960s although it would also suggest the television studio as a plastic and 'null' space, representing only itself. The second set has clear links to the dilapidated rooms that Beckett often prescribes as the settings for his theatre plays (perhaps especially *Endgame*). In the end, the completed 1977 programme *Shades* used a theatre as the location for a discussion about Beckett between presenter Melvyn Bragg and expert commentator Martin Esslin, accompanying screenings of *Not I* and two original television plays by Beckett (*Ghost Trio* and *... but the clouds ...*). Theatricality was signalled by putting Bragg and Esslin in a theatre, but both of the original plays were shot in television studios and *Not I*, although based on a theatre production, had been specially staged and adapted for the screen. It was shot on 16mm film in 1975 at BBC's Ealing Television Film Studios, with synchronised sound. However, while the version of *Not I* exploited the close-up aesthetic of television and the bounded shape of the screen frame, with Billie Whitelaw's mouth in close-up throughout, it relied on the close involvement of the Royal Court Theatre

production team. Powell's undated production notes show that the original intention was to include the character of the Auditor from the theatre staging of the play, though this figure was omitted from the filmed version. The Royal Court's stage manager was there to prompt for Whitelaw, who had been the leading performer on stage, and the special chair in which Whitelaw performed had been brought over from the theatre. Although *Not I* became 'televisual', it derived from and used the personnel of the theatre version.

Similarly, the Royal Court Theatre was the source for BBC2's 1979 production of *Happy Days*, featuring Billie Whitelaw.[8] The production was repeated in a series of Beckett adaptations broadcast in December 1982, as announced by *Radio Times*: '*Arena* presents the first programme in a Samuel Beckett Season providing a unique opportunity to see famous interpretations of his work. The playwright himself directed this production of his classic play *Happy Days*, and BILLIE WHITELAW, Beckett's favourite actress, plays Winnie—one of the strangest parts in modern theatre.'[9] When D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus's film (1981) of *Rockaby* was screened in the same week, *Radio Times* drew attention to its theatrical provenance: '*Arena* continues the Samuel Beckett Season with a unique record of his new play *Rockaby* which has just opened at the National Theatre. Premièred in America, it was filmed in rehearsal and performance by the celebrated film maker D. A. Pennebaker. The programme follows Billie Whitelaw's preparations for her latest Beckett role'. The listing finishes with an explicit invitation: 'Attend the opening night in Buffalo, New York, and see the strange and haunting play'.[10] Television adaptation was represented as the way for the television viewer to see theatre plays of acknowledged cultural standing, written by a famous and enigmatic writer, performed by some of the leading actors of the time. The television medium acted as a channel for the wider public circulation of valued knowledge and cultural experience to that part of the audience that might be interested.

The room as a performative space

In the three adaptations of *Krapp's Last Tape* discussed in detail below, attention is directed to bravura performances in relatively fully-realised sets. In each case, the interiors draw attention to the composition of space, the selective lighting in the television studio and the placing of objects, entrances and exits. There is a sense of confidence in the representation of space because of the way that wide shots at the

start of each version give access to it and situate Krapp within it. Exterior space and Krapp's kitchen are unseen, although defined in relation to the main playing area, and instead the camera's movement is towards the centre of the space where the performer sits at his desk with his tape recorder. The studio is used as a theatrical space in which a constructed three-sided set is left open on its fourth side. The missing fourth wall implies the separation of audience space from stage space, although camera movements closer to and to the side of the performer reduce this separation.

In all three versions of *Krapp*, the employment of the cameras displays a confidence in their ability to show more than a theatre audience might see, and they demonstrate access to and understanding of space. They acknowledge but also move away from theatrical staging of space and towards the alternation of points of view that is conventional in television drama. The settings, performance styles and lighting are different in each version and they have surprisingly different durations. The distinct uses of studio space and its technologies impact on performance style, shot type, sets and lighting. Adaptations of Beckett's theatre plays for television use the 'intimacy' of the studio and the primacy of acted performance differently, but they largely match what the director Don Taylor (1988: 38) understood to be the 'essence' of drama for the medium: 'a single drama, recorded in a television studio more or less continuously, certainly in whole scene takes, and, in its purest form, without any use of location filming'. This form, Taylor argues, has a special relationship with dramatic writing and the detail of linguistic choices realised by performance; it 'relishes imaginative, argumentative and even poetic writing in a way the film camera does not. It is at its best in long, developing scenes, where the actors can work without interference from the director's camera, using their own timing rather than his' (*ibid*.). The overall effect is to produce an intense and integrated work of art by means of collaborative authorship: 'When director, lighting designer and designers work in harmony, its pictures glow with the colours of Titian and Veronese, which, because of their electronic origin, are quite unlike the colours the film camera produces' (*ibid*.). These collaborative outputs are especially significant for adaptations of Beckett's theatre, because the small cast, single setting, slow pace of action and thus the focus on specific elements of physical and verbal performance all conduce to a greater weight of viewer attention being placed on individual moments of action and on the relationship of action to the surrounding visible space in the frame.

A version of *Krapp* directed by Alan Schneider and featuring Jack McGowran was made in 1971 for the New York television station WNET. Beckett disliked what he regarded as an exaggerated performance by McGowran (Knowlson 1996: 582) and the adaptation was withheld from broadcast until it was acquired by Channel 4 and shown in 1990. Its 55-minute duration leaves plenty of time for McGowran to explore the possibilities for movement between the front and the back of the set where a door to an unseen kitchen is placed, so that his bent and jerky body posture can demonstrate Krapp's age and decrepitude. The temporal extension enforced by the action, in which Krapp searches for and plays back tape recordings of his own audio diary from earlier years, matches the spatial expansiveness of the set itself. Krapp's room is much larger than a 'realistic' room might be, and a wide shot of extended duration begins the adaptation, offering the viewer knowledge of this space but drawing attention to its odd proportions. The room resembles a proscenium theatre stage, with Krapp and other set elements (a desk, the kitchen doorway) clearly established in relation to each other. Lighting concentrates attention on Krapp himself, and colour links Krapp to the space in the similarity of the yellow overhead lampshade to the studio lighting whose yellowish hue makes Krapp's skin look sallow. Camera movement is always forwards into the space or into the space from one side, offering more than a theatre spectator in a fixed seat could see, yet never moving behind Krapp to look towards the place of the audience. As the play proceeds, greater use of close-up invites the audience to understand Krapp's thoughts and feelings from his facial expression, and thus also showcases McGowran's skill as a mime.

The 1972 adaptation featuring Patrick Magee, directed by Donald McWhinnie for BBC's *Thirty Minute Theatre*, is significantly shorter. The duration gives Magee fewer chances to develop his performance physically, and the emphasis is on psychological concentration more than physical action. The set is narrower than in Schneider's version, and geometric lines created by a sloping ceiling, beams of light cutting diagonally across the space, and bits of litter on the floor around Krapp all contribute to an impression of enclosure, rather like the oppressive geometry of a Constructivist theatre set. The yellowish lamp does not determine the lighting palette, which is a cold greyish white. The reflective surface of the floor bounces light around the space, and parallels the reflection caused when light hits Magee's sweating face. Indeed, Krapp's perspiration can be read as a physical index of mental concentration

and emotional investment in his recall of his past (as Barthes 1973 argued of the performances in the 1953 MGM film *Julius Caesar*). As in Schneider's version, the camera stays relatively frontal to the space, offering few shots from the side and instead privileging the close-up on Magee's expression, in shots that are tighter than those on McGowran. This adaptation seems dominated by principles of condensation and intensity that match the play's short length, and which also emphasize facial expression more than physical movement in the constrained space.

BBC4's 2007 adaptation of *Krapp*, featuring Harold Pinter and directed by Ian Rickson, is significantly different from the earlier versions discussed above. The room is much smaller and is very dimly lit, so that its wealth of detail (notably Krapp's bookshelves that are immediately behind him) is hard to see. It is much more 'realistic' as a room, but there is little scope for physical movement in the space, and Krapp (played by Pinter who was very ill at the time) is also constrained by a wheelchair so that details of movement and facial expression predominate in the performance. The yellowish lighting falls almost entirely on Krapp himself, and contrasts with the deep blues and browns of the set around him. The lighting seems less motivated by realism, but works expressively to highlight Krapp in distinction to the musty and dim setting. The camera moves more fluidly than in either the 1971 or 1972 adaptations, and even circles above and almost behind Krapp, making this adaptation the least 'theatrically' frontal. Pinter's performance emphasizes stillness rather than gesture or facial mobility, and overhead lighting prevents a consistently clear view of his face. His face is contemplative rather than seeming to wrestle with inner forces, and eruptions of sound from Krapp as he listens to his tapes take on greater force in contrast to the static body position and facial expression that predominate for the play's 55-minute duration. As in the other adaptations, the camera moves into close-up increasingly through the play, but this is integrated more into the overall strategy for point-of-view since preceding wide shots of the space reveal much less of the setting than in the earlier versions. This adaptation was billed in *Radio Times* with reference to its theatrical provenance, as an 'intriguing opportunity to see Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter perform Samuel Beckett's dazzling examination of memory and mortality at the Royal Court Theatre in London'.[11] But its lack of wide shots, the muted and physically still performance by Pinter, and the mobility of the camera, make it the most 'televisual' and least 'theatrical' of the

adaptations because of the relationship between the room, the camera and the performer.

Television drama has built on a theatrical heritage centred on domestic stories told in domestic settings. Problems of individual identity, family, home and social class have been explored in theatre by working them through on stage, and in television drama in the studio, acted out in three-dimensional space. Raymond Williams (1990: 56) described television drama as 'the ultimate realisation of the original naturalist convention: the drama of the small enclosed room, in which a few characters lived out their private experience of an unseen public world'. The television producer Troy Kennedy Martin (1964) saw this dramatic form as deriving from European naturalist theatre and from American television drama of the 1950s, such as Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty* (NBC, 1953), putting characters on screen who appear ordinary and recognizable, as if they have just walked in from the street outside. It is a tradition that Kennedy Martin criticised for its illusionistic settings and psychological performance style. By contrast, rooms in Beckett's plays are lonely and empty environments, and in television productions they are clearly sets rather than locations. They draw attention to the artificial and metaphorical conventions of the theatrical avant-garde, rather than naturalism, by their high-contrast lighting that picks out specific parts of the space, their pared-down settings and few props, and their manipulation of proportion and perspective. While the television adaptations of *Krapp* certainly foreground performance, and use close-up to grant access to Krapp's thought processes and intensifying emotional responses to his tape recordings, the performance styles are exaggerated rather than 'natural', and develop in complex relationships with the sparse but therefore significant objects and spaces of the setting. While not exactly reflexive, the stagings for these adaptations of *Krapp* make no pretence of realism, and instead draw attention to artifice.

Picture planes

The camera's access to the three-dimensional space of a room contrasts with the frontal modes of address in television adaptations of Beckett's *Comédie*, *Not I* and *Was Wo*. Flat compositions represent an alternate approach to adaptation where the studio resembles the planar surface of a picture, and the space refuses three-dimensionality. For example, the French director Marin Karmitz made a film version of Beckett's *Comédie* in 1966, working closely with Beckett in a Paris studio (Foster

2012). This production used the interior space to explore the possibilities of a frontal relationship that matched the theatre play's staging in which three figures are stationary in a row of large urns throughout. In the theatre, the characters only speak when a spotlight falls on them. It is as if the light compels them to speak. Karmitz transformed this by cutting quickly from character to character in his film, as if the camera calls upon each to speak and be captured in the frame. The result is a rapid alternation of similar static and planar shot compositions. The studio becomes an abstract space that both retains a link with theatrical staging and also emphasises montage and framing in ways that draw attention to the film medium. The studio does not resemble a theatre stage, and the urns and speakers are suspended in a dimensionless space that is only comprehensible through the relative sizes of the characters in the image—large if they are near, and small if they are far away. The rhythms of editing produce a fugue-like system of combinations of shot sizes and compositions, paralleling the rapid alternations of character speeches individually and in groups. Rapid cuts between close-ups and long shots, with the characters stationary and facing the camera with blank expressions, disorient the viewer rather than giving access to a performance. While the actors in Karmitz's production had appeared in a 1964 staging of the play in Paris, the film started afresh from the published text (Herren 2009).

The planar surface in a depthless space was also used in the BBC's version of *Not I* in 1977 and in the SDR adaptation of *Footfalls* in 1988. In each of these, light picks out images that are always on the same linear plane at the same distance from the camera. In *Not I* there is just Whitelaw's mouth, gabbling the words in close-up, with no cuts between shots, so that the viewer seems to be confronted face-to-face. In *Footfalls* a single female figure trudges slowly from left to right across a dark space, and back again. Action in three-dimensional space is flattened onto a plane that reproduces the planar surface of the television screen, producing image compositions that seem graphical as much as representational. Beckett directed *Was Wo* with Walter Asmus at SDR in 1985 for broadcast the following year. In this adaptation the characters' bodies in the stage version were replaced by a large, diaphanous face (Bam) on the left side of the screen, and three smaller but brighter faces (Bim, Bom and Bem) on the right. The faces slowly materialize, speak, then dematerialize back into complete darkness in the television version, as if they meet and pass through the surface of the black screen into light, then disappear back again. Their appearing and

vanishing parallels the play's oscillating relationships of power and powerlessness among the voices. The depthless plane on screen matches the play's questioning title—in English translation, *What Where*—and the faces seem to hesitate between material presence and fading into null blackness. By using the studio to shoot the faces in different shot sizes and with variable levels of light, the post-produced collage of these shots appears to bring an impossible set of spaces and times together on the same screen surface.

These static compositions and schematic, graphical uses of lighting and contrast invite the viewer to contemplate their structural, painterly qualities, as if they were abstract pictures on a gallery wall. The surface of the screen becomes a composition and a surface as well as a window through which action and movement are perceived. A later example of this is *Act without Words II*, directed by Enda Hughes for the *Beckett on Film* (2000) season, where the actors' performance appears in the horizontally aligned 'windows' of celluloid film frames, in a depthless flat space. In the framing materials around Beckett's drama when presented on television in Britain and Germany, similar tensions can be seen between space and flat screen. As noted above, the BBC's 1977 programme *Shades* was presented from a London theatre, in which Melvyn Bragg interviewed Martin Esslin about Beckett's work. Esslin was shot from a slightly off-centre position, revealing the theatre stage behind him on which a circular spotlight threw an elliptical shape. The presentation was designed not to appear frontal and flat, but spatial and to some extent theatrical. This contrasted with the photographs and artworks shown in the programme (photographs of Beckett, and paintings by Francis Bacon, for example) that were necessarily planar. In SDR's broadcast of a selection of Beckett's work in 1986, similar tensions can be seen. The caption card showed Beckett himself standing on the set of his television play *Quadrat I & II* [*Quad*] (SDR, 1981) and thus in a spatial volume whose back wall was partially created by a superimposed photograph appearing to rise vertically from the floor. In the main body of the programme, however, the presenter Georg Hensel adopted an entirely frontal position against a flat backdrop to address the viewer as if face-to-face. This planar composition contrasted strongly with the caption card, and each format made a link with the spatial and planar tensions in Beckett's dramas themselves. In the later *Beckett on Film* (2000) series of adaptations, the same tensions were still at work: Neil Jordan's version of *Not I* uses frontal and side-on camera positions, suggesting a planar arrangement that segments space into two axes,

while Anthony Minghella's *Play* experiments interestingly with the spatial depth of a large set, frontal and side-on close-ups of performers, and interpolated film frames that draw attention to the flat surface of the recording medium.

In one case a Beckett theatre text was 'opened out' to include sequences not specified in the script. The BBC's *Festival* version of *Krapp*, produced by Peter Luke and directed by Prudence Fitzgerald, was recorded on videotape at BBC Television Centre in October 1963. Fitzgerald expanded the cast to include a Nurse (Genny Cook), and Krapp's lover (Kika Markham) in addition to Cyril Cusack as Krapp, so that flashbacks of Krapp's past with his lover could be introduced electronically, with scenes appearing to issue from the mirror in Krapp's room. The flashbacks were shot on film in a water tank and showed Krapp punting past a tree with his lover, and were over-lit to give a dreamy effect in contrast to the very low lighting of Krapp's room. Editing the play in post-production was lengthy and problematic, and the director was so unhappy with the programme that she seriously considered withdrawing it from transmission.[12] This example of departure from as-if-live studio production of Beckett's theatre plays demonstrates that 'opening out' to take advantage of special effects and post-production appeared ultimately to have neither aesthetic nor technical benefits, and records of audience response support this conclusion.

Viewers of the BBC's Beckett adaptations were conscious that what they were watching was theatre adapted for the screen. The BBC's Audience Report on the 1961 version of *Godot*, for example, included explicit acknowledgement of the play's staging in London.[13] The report refers to audience resistance to the play alongside their awareness of its reputation at the Royal Court Theatre, quoting one unnamed viewer who thought this was 'a lot of fatuous nonsense. I'm not even going to try to decide, as the critics did for months when it first came out, what the author was getting at'. The Audience Report on the 1963 *Krapp* said:

> over two-thirds of those supplying evidence thought the play excruciatingly dull and dreary to watch. … Krapp's 'den' looked too large for his supposed indigence, it was said, and there were many complaints about the detail (the lighting, as 'too gloomy' in particular) of the production that viewers, grudgingly for the most part, admitted was in keeping with the mood of the play. One or two thought the management of the 'flash-back' sequences (with scenes from Krapp's past appearing to issue from the mirror on the wall) just

> ‘plain silly’, but there were others who spoke of the whole technique of presentation and the ‘special effects’ in particular as very effective and ‘cleverly done’.[14]

Viewers were prepared to overlook patently ‘unrealistic’ settings and pared-down visual detail as long as other aspects of the play (most often the actors’ performances) compensated for this. They expected to see well-known actors with theatre reputations (as well as experience in television drama) and to enjoy intense performances by them. They recognised the significance of Beckett as a theatre writer, but if they did not enjoy the drama they expressed feelings of alienation and incomprehension.

The study of Beckett’s theatre plays as presented on television offers an exceptional opportunity to analyse how adaptation strategies recur across the decades and are affected by a range of textual and extra-textual forces. For both aesthetic and practical reasons, long before the post-1960 programmes discussed here, television adaptation of theatre had ceased to relay staged performances as if the camera were a member of the audience with a seat in the stalls (Cooke 2003: 14). Spatial constraint of this kind was reserved for performances of opera, rare relays of West End stage farces (Wyver 2011) and situation comedy written for television. Even when fourth-wall sets were used, they were designed without an elevated stage or pieces of set at different heights, so that mobile camera dollies on the flat studio floor could let the cameras penetrate into the performance space and create opportunities for lateral shots, multiple angles for close-ups and either tracking or panning shots as well as zooms into the action. The spatial constraint and the restraint of camera positions and movement in Beckett’s adapted theatre plays, both those he directed himself and those directed by others, are thus significant and draw attention to themselves.

Frontal arrangements restrict the types of shots available to the director, and use up much of the studio floor-area because wide shots need to encompass both foreground and background. For Beckett’s plays, relatively large studio spaces need to contain only a single set, but the cameras move in restricted ways around it. This maximises spatial concentration for the viewer but also temporal concentration, since sequences in almost all the adaptations are shot in long takes with minimal cuts. In the television industry, camera movement and the avoidance of frontal shooting have been encouraged as the best use of the medium’s possibilities and its non-theatrical

aesthetic. Even in studio-shot single plays of the 1950s and 1960s such as those for ITV's *Armchair Theatre* (1956-74), cameras were moved smoothly into and around the fictional space, along axial dimensions and also in curving and swooping movements (Cooke, 2003: 43-7). Variation of camera height, or close-ups on actors or set details also added to the sense of the studio space as dynamic, rather than enclosed and oriented towards a specific angle of viewing.

When adaptations of Beckett's plays were made in large single sets, arranging the studio as an empty space with a three-walled set was an unusual and theatrical choice. Such choices encourage viewer responses to spatial constraint and temporal intensity that benefit the plays aesthetically, but often they did not please their audiences at home despite often being critically admired (Bignell 2009: 164-201). The fact that the adaptations used the performers, staging and often some of the production staff of theatre productions of the same plays, meant that professional critics and occasionally domestic viewers could make comparisons between stage and screen in terms of quality and achievement. Production histories of theatre versions of the plays invited evaluation of the adaptations in relation to each other but also in relation to theatre productions (whereas such discourses were not available for evaluating adaptations of novels). Many of the personnel making Beckett adaptations had theatre backgrounds (producers and directors as well as performers) and the high cultural value of theatre as an artistic form lent the adaptations a special cachet for their makers and sometimes for their audiences. The spatial realization of Beckett's theatre plays on television was a means to negotiate ideas about the relationships between television and theatre in very concrete ways (Bignell 2019). Stage space and screen space were articulated with and against each other, both materially and conceptually.[15]

Productions discussed

Act without Words II by Samuel Beckett (*Beckett on Film*). Dir. Enda Hughes. 2000. Channel 4. 7.20-7.35 pm, Friday 29 March 2002.

Eh Joe by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Alan Gibson. BBC2. 10.20-10.40pm, Monday 4 July 1966.

Footfalls by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Walter Asmus. SDR. 1988. Channel 4. 00.00-00.20 am, Wednesday 13 February 1990.

Happy Days by Samuel Beckett (*Arena*). Dir. Samuel Beckett. BBC2. 8.30-10.10pm, Saturday 13 October 1979.

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett (*Festival*). Dir. Prudence Fitzgerald. BBC. 9.55-10.35pm, Wednesday 13 November 1963.

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett (*Thirty Minute Theatre*). Dir. Donald McWhinnie. BBC2. 10.25-11.00pm, Wednesday 29 November 1972.

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Alan Schneider. WNET. 1971. Channel 4, as *Homage to Beckett: Krapp's Last Tape*. 9.00-10.05 pm, Sunday 11 February 1990.

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Ian Rickson. BBC4. 9.00-9.50pm, Thursday 21 June 2007.

*Not I*by Samuel Beckett (*Beckett on Film*). Dir. Neil Jordan. 2000. Channel 4. 7.45-8.00 pm, Sunday 1 July 2001.

Play by Samuel Beckett (*Beckett on Film*). Dir. Anthony Minghella. 2000. Channel 4. 7.45-8.00 pm, Friday 29 June 2001.

Quad [*Quadrat I & II*] by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Samuel Beckett. SDR. 1981. BBC2. 10.40-11.00 pm, Thursday 16 December 1982.

Rockaby by Samuel Beckett (*Arena*). Dir. D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus. BBC2. 10.05-10.55pm, Tuesday 14 December 1982.

Shades, an hour-long edition of *The Lively Arts* offering three plays by Samuel Beckett accompanied by discussion by Melvyn Bragg and Martin Esslin: *Ghost Trio* dir. Donald McWhinnie; *... but the clouds ...* dir. Donald McWhinnie; and *Not I*, dir. Anthony Page. BBC2. 9.00-10.00pm, Sunday 17 April 1977.

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett. Prod. Donald McWhinnie. BBC. 9.50-11.20pm, Monday 26 June 1961.

Was Wo [*What Where*] by Samuel Beckett. Dir. Samuel Beckett and Walter Asmus. SDR. 1986.

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Endnotes

[1] See the programme file '*The Lively Arts*: *Shades*', at the BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), file number T51/350/1. Subsequent references are given as BBC WAC followed by the file number.

[2] *Radio Times*, 9 December 1982, p. 53.

[3] See BBC WAC, T5/2420/1, '*Waiting for Godot*'.

[4] BBC WAC, T5/2239/7 'TV Drama memos 1964', memo from Harry Moore to Head of Drama Group, 9 February 1964.

[5] For the process of producing *Shades*, see BBC WAC, T51/350/1, '*The Lively Arts: Shades*'.

[6] For the production process of the 1961 play, see BBC WAC, T5/2420/1.

[7] Again, see BBC WAC, T51/350/1, '*The Lively Arts: Shades*'.

[8] BBC WAC, RCONT20 'Samuel Beckett, 1970-79', memo from Tristram Powell (producer) to BBC Copyright Department, 13 June 1979.

[9] *Radio Times*, 9 December 1982, p. 25.

[10] *Radio Times*, 9 December 1982, p. 47.

[11] *Radio Times*, 14 June 2007, p. 120.

[12] BBC WAC, T5/2144/1, memo from Peter Luke (producer) to Prudence Fitzgerald (director), 14 November 1963.

[13] BBC WAC, R/9/7/52, 'Audience Research Report: *Waiting for Godot*', 26 June 1961.

[14] BBC WAC, R9/7/63, 'Audience Research Report: *Thirty Minute Theatre. Krapp's Last Tape*', 13 November 1963.

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