Beckett and televisual ecosystems: dramas of the vast wasteland

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Samuel Beckett and Televisual Ecosystems:

Dramas of the Vast Wasteland

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Recently, Samuel Beckett's work has been addressed by readings that stress its relevance to, and commentary upon, contemporary environmental concerns.[1] In common with his other works, Beckett's dramas written for television can be understood as representations of a desolate, bleak, even post-apocalyptic world, in which human figures wait in bare rooms for someone or something that never arrives. The first section of this chapter outlines such an ecological reading, then offers a new way of thinking through Beckett's television dramas by situating them in the ecologies of television. Just as ecological thinking needs to link and separate the local and the global to identify opportunities for agency and change, Beckett's television ecologies require a medium-specific approach in addition to noting intermedial correspondences. This chapter argues that Beckett's TV dramas are meditations on the 'vast wasteland' of television culture, so called in the early 1960s by Newton Minow (1984), head of the USA's Federal Communications Commission, which framed television's regulatory environment in the largest and most globally dominant media culture. Beckett's television plays work with the bleak vision of television as a space of deadening sterility that framed the ways television was thought about in the Western capitalist world. However, since media institutions are subject to, and agencies of, national ideological and economic systems, as well as global forces, analysis of Beckett's broadcast work also needs to recognize the specific opportunities and constraints of the national UK and German contexts where the plays were made.

It is commonplace to use ecological metaphors to refer to national media cultures, in phrases like 'the UK broadcasting landscape' and 'the US regulatory environment', and to refer

to processes of change in media cultures in terms drawn from biology and natural history such as adaptation or extinction (Bignell, 2019a). Beckett's television plays can be seen as sites where competing ideas of television blend and clash, where programmes become evidence of an exhausted media culture or are critical diagnoses of one, or where watching television is seen as a vitalising or a deadening experience. Ecologies are characterized by interdependence and inertia which might inhibit change, but also by dynamism and the ability to respond to new circumstances. By unfixing themselves from conventions of televisual form, Beckett's TV dramas make themselves more able to adapt to new and different media ecologies. If Beckett's television work does not have an obvious place in a media ecosystem, it can form surprising interrelationships with other kinds of audio-visual works, on television and elsewhere, acquiring creative and critical agency. While considering the television plays as a reflection or representation of a wasteland, the chapter analyses how the plays undercut their apparent premise. In the plays, paradoxically, evoking the TV wasteland depends on an ambitious and vital culture amongst the networks of people in the broadcasting ecologies of the UK and Germany that created them, and also on the creative ways that the plays exploit the affordances of the TV medium. Thus, in the final section, the chapter argues that Beckett's television plays can transcend the entropic narrative, implied by the idea of 'wasteland', in which media ecologies are seen as exhausted and failing.

The Domestic Wastelands of Television

Each of Beckett's TV plays is staged in an interior, domestic setting, signalling human habitation created by transforming natural materials and demarcating a living space from its exterior surroundings. Long unbroken takes (camera shots of long duration) allow the camera to take in the detail of human figures in interior space and how they interact with it, giving the viewer an impression of full visual access. Thus, the plays' visual style suggests a confidence

in placing human figures in a realized environment, but this fullness is used to represent kinds of emptiness. The visible spaces in the plays scarcely resemble rooms in a house; they are bare, lacking much furnishing or the other clutter of a home. The walls, where they exist at all, are blank, unadorned, and there are no features to indicate a specific historical period. Design signifies non-place and atemporality. The rooms look stylized and unreal, like the stage flats used in a studio theatre to indicate that a play is set at home.[2] The effect might be to signal austerity or institutional functionalism, as in a prison, hospital or bomb shelter, but mainly it signifies an abstract interiority that is appropriate to the focus on the inner lives of the figures on screen; their memories, fantasies and dreams. These are 'unhomely' (*unheimlich*) works, to use Sigmund Freud's term for the uncanny (1993) – the disturbingly familiar yet unfamiliar,[3] and their bleak spatial realisation enables them to represent or allude to inner anxieties about an ecological catastrophe that could be outside the room.

By putting spatial and temporal coordinates into question, Beckett's television plays question the place of the human in the world and the relationships between human figures and their immediate environment. Nevertheless, they take place in a setting; they occupy space. Like modernist ecologies such as the arid, sterile landscape evoked at the start of T. S. Eliot's 'Wasteland' (1922), a dead land of ecological catastrophe, they are inhabited by human figures seeking for meaning. In Beckett's first TV play, *Eh Joe*, made by BBC in 1966, Joe tries to enclose himself protectively within his room, drawing over-large curtains and checking that the oddly-sized doors and windows are closed. In television drama, such distortions of shape and proportion are also undermining of the security of authorial and readerly point of view underpinned by television's visual conventions of framing and perspective (Heath, 1976). A woman's voice harangues Joe, and the single camera draws closer to him in a challenging, accusatory way, but the speaker is unseen, and she appears to be within Joe's mind. There is no physical interaction, and the uncanny room interior mirrors the ambiguity of Joe's

relationship to the voice that may or may not be inside his consciousness. Just as the apparently homely interior is alien, empty and visually confusing, the interpersonal relationships of the drama are etiolated and ontologically unstable.

The next two teleplays concern male figures who are waiting hopefully for a longed-for female figure to arrive. In *Ghost Trio* (made in the UK by BBC in 1977), she is associated with music that might conjure her into presence,[4] but she never comes to the closed door of the room, which houses only a bed and a stool on which the dishevelled male figure sits. A female voice describes the rectangular shapes of the set and the props, but she seems unable or unwilling to change the spatial and human relationships in the drama. The hiss of falling rain outside the room can be heard throughout the play, and the voice, V, remarks that hers is 'a faint voice', and that the images of the play are all in 'shades of grey'. The monochrome images create a ghostly, indistinct and otherworldly tone that matches the associations of its title. The *Daily Telegraph* newspaper's review of the play assumed that 'Beckett does not believe in colour television, it seems, just in case too much information is let loose. And then the grey is made as misty as possible so that the characters are dimly perceived' (Day-Lewis, 1977). Shades of grey are anachronistic given the late 1970s context of colour television (Bignell, 2021), and make the play look out of place in the media ecology of its present. Eckart Voigts-Virchow suggests that 'the stone age of TV production is exactly where Beckett's television locates its aesthetic strategies as a perennial offence to the medium's surface gloss' (1998, 227). *Ghost Trio* might be set either in a timeless past or amid the cold, persistent rain of the possible future nuclear winter that cast a constant shadow during the Cold War period. Each of these possible temporalities would be a lonely wasteland.

The male figure in *... but the clouds ...* (shot and screened by BBC in the UK and by West German television in 1977) places himself in a 'sanctum', an interior domestic space, which contrasts with his nocturnal walks along 'the roads', an apparently rural and deserted

external environment. He recalls his occasional visions of a beloved woman, who is eventually seen in indistinct shadows in the final sequence, but she is silent and not in the same space-time as him. She appears as a ghostly, near-static image at the end of the play, when he ventriloquizes her silent recitation of lines from the William Butler Yeats poem from which the play's title derives. Its mention of birds and clouds reference an unseen natural world that contrasts strongly with the visible spaces of both the 'sanctum' and the 'roads', each of which is indicated by small spot-lit areas in an otherwise blank, dark studio space. The figures and landscapes, interior and exterior, in the television plays gesture towards representation of human habitations, routines and actions, and the external world that borders them, but all of this seems summoned from off-screen space in non-realist visual forms that are stark and abstract. This bleak aesthetic links the figures' mental interiority with the appearance of the physical spaces they inhabit.

The last of Beckett's dramas for television, *Nacht und Träume* (broadcast in 1983 by SDR in West Germany), represents another empty, darkened room with a single male figure, dimly lit and seated at a table. The figure bows his head and seems to enter a reverie, associated with the song by Schubert that provides the title. In the inset electronic image that the camera shows above the seated figure, heavenly hands offer him gestures of comfort and symbols of religious communion (such as a chalice), before the dream fades and leaves him as before. Each television play shares the motifs of the room, isolated figures and the absence of a potential relationship with an absent someone or something outside. The plays are each concerned with a yearning for connection and with visions of an other, thus alluding to the television viewer's simultaneous isolation and communion with others. The domestic nature of television as a medium is indicated by interior room settings as well as by the interactions between figures, images and voices but, paradoxically, the familiar homeliness of both human relationships and of human habitation is consistently distanced and deferred.

The mise-en-scene of Beckett's television plays also corresponds with the exhaustion, dilapidation and isolation explored in many contemporary dystopian televisual and cinematic fictions. Protagonists lose their homes, families and their ability to rely on the safety of a familiar environment when civilisation and the natural resources on which it depends are exposed as fragile and precarious, in programmes characterized by a persistent tone of anxiety, loneliness and wariness.[5] The time-traveling protagonists of *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 2005–) in the 1970s often arrived in decaying societies ravaged by war, tyranny or ecological collapse, a metaphor for Western (especially British) culture that literalized it in material, physical terms as an exhausted wasteland. Beckett's on-screen figures were also perhaps survivors wandering in a dead, featureless landscape like the one expected to result from global thermonuclear war, a fear that motivated the dystopian imagination of much television science fiction. The unpeopled, grey rooms of Beckett's television plays have an aesthetic that links them to this broader cultural landscape. Television has always had science fiction meta-commentaries on its ability to imagine alternative realities, where humans are unfixed from their home environment and transported to another time and space. Reflexive meta-television in the science fiction genre might aspire to Beckett's insights into humankind's existential longings, while Beckett's plays might look to some viewers like television science fiction.

Television Ecologies: Exhaustion and Vitality

Prevailing views of television culture during Beckett's lifetime were expressed through metaphors of environmental catastrophe. For intellectual commentators the mediascape had degenerated into a cultural void, as Minow's 'vast wasteland' speech proclaimed. The media historian Jeffrey Sconce summarized their attitude as one in which the medium was 'a zone of suspended animation, a form of oblivion from which viewers might not ever escape' (Sconce, 2000, 131). So, while television had become by the 1960s an everyday fixture amongst the

furniture of the home (Chambers, 2019), the spatio-temporal habitus of everyday life that this ordinary machine reflected and shaped was thought of as a living death, a spiritual and cultural wasteland. Some Beckett critics have adopted a similar view because of the economic relationships that underpin the commercial ecology of Western, especially American, television. For Graley Herren, the fact that (US) network television offers pleasurable entertainment in exchange for viewers giving their attention to TV advertising means viewers are limited to a passive form of viewership constrained by consumerism. Herren presents Beckett's work as a wake-up call to these mass audiences of zombie couch potatoes, as an antidote to the 'vast wasteland' of current television (2007, 49). Television is part of the consumer capitalism that has produced ecological crisis, making relationships between the political economy of television and environmental politics more than metaphorical.

Viewers found Beckett's television plays puzzling and depressing. The BBC's Audience Research department collected data about the proportion of the British population watching each of its programmes as well as allocating a score for audience appreciation based on the reactions of viewers. The viewership of *Eh Joe* in 1966 was calculated as 3 per cent of the national audience, and the Reaction Index was 49 out of 100, about 12 points below the figures achieved by BBC's more mainstream television dramas. A sample viewer of *Eh Joe*, responding in a BBC questionnaire about the programme, explained that 'I like plays with proper sets, not a bed and a couple of doors covered by curtains' (BBC, 1966). Viewers thought Beckett's plays were intriguing, but dreary. Negative reactions like these play into the cultural pessimism of commentators like Jonathan Kalb, who criticizes television for 'shrinking attention spans, discouraging reading and encouraging passive, narcotized habits of viewing art of all kinds' (Kalb, 1989, 99). If Beckett's television dramas reflected the cultural void of television back to its own viewers, it is not surprising that those viewers found them dull and dispiriting, and indeed, perhaps that was partly their point.

Nevertheless, the idea that television might comment on, illustrate or embody a broader cultural moment is made possible by the assumption that television can be art, and can comment on its own medium and cultural environment. In this regard, the media environment that gave rise to and sustained the institutions and professional networks that produced it needs to be discussed through metaphors other than that of a wasteland. The term 'broadcasting' is itself already a metaphor deriving from a relationship between humans and the natural world. The term derives from sowing seed for growing arable crops. For thousands of years, humans have collected the seeds of wheat, barley and other cereals, and thrown these seeds by hand onto a soil surface prepared for their germination. Broadcasting is the activity of sowing seeds, but as the Biblical Parable of the Sower (Mark, 4, 3–9) demonstrates, there is a spectrum of probabilities governing whether seeds will grow. Some seed falls on stony ground and does not germinate, while other seeds may grow weakly or strongly. In relation to modern electronic media, broadcasting disseminates transmissions from a centralized, industrially organized institution such as a TV network so that they can be received at a distance by a mass, largely anonymous audience. The metaphor of sowing includes the inevitable outcome that some viewers will not receive the broadcast at all, while others will have a range of different responses to it. In Western Europe especially, an idea of public benefit underlay the commissioning of programmes, including the one-off dramas that Beckett wrote for the medium. There was an institutional culture in which Beckett's work was thought to be potentially fertile and nourishing for viewers, such that it should be broadcast widely to national audiences. Paradoxically, Beckett's grey, empty worlds were thought important to disseminate.

At the BBC in the UK, producers and directors working in both radio and television consistently commissioned Beckett to write for national broadcasting and maintained personal relationships with him over decades. Key personnel included the drama producers Michael Bakewell, Barbara Bray and Martin Esslin, and the drama director Donald McWhinnie, for

example. The BBC's mission (and that of its competitors Independent Television and later Channel 4) included an obligation to disseminate the work of nationally and internationally important playwrights, and to support emerging writers and new, challenging work. In West Germany, the national television ecology was somewhat similar, with powerful publicly funded broadcasters that had obligations to inform, educate and entertain their audiences. A few years after the London premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, Michael Barry, BBC Head of Drama for Television, fended off an offer by an ITV producer for a TV version of the play, offering Beckett's agent the then relatively substantial fee of £250 for the broadcasting rights (Bignell, 2015, 134). The BBC made a 1961 adaptation, the first screen *Godot* anywhere in the world. Later, the BBC made the first three of Beckett's television plays and many other TV adaptations of his stage work. In southern Germany, the broadcaster Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR), based in Stuttgart, repeatedly made adaptations of Beckett's work and productions of his dramas for television, beginning with *Eh Joe* in 1966. Later, SDR produced the premieres of his last two TV plays, *Quadrat 1 + 2* (*Quad*) in 1981 and *Nacht und Träume* in 1983. Indeed, *Nacht und Träume* was commissioned by Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, the channel's head of television who Beckett got to know well. SDR employed Beckett's preferred German director, Walter Asmus, to work with him to shoot the dramas according to Beckett's wishes. The institutional landscapes of both British and German television sustained ecologies characterized by laudable aims to offer the best of contemporary drama to their viewers. Drawing on Olga Beloborodova's, James Little's and Pim Verhulst's concept of 'collaborative ecology' explored in Chapter Three of this volume, I argue that Beckett's slow, grey, apparently deadening dramas were made possible by a lively and committed group of collaborators, who wanted to facilitate their dissemination to a mass audience.

On the one hand, Beckett's television plays seem to represent a wasteland, both literally in their aesthetic form and their on-screen realisation, but also metaphorically as engagements

with prevailing critiques that saw television as a deadening, passive and dehumanising medium that conduces to a sterile cultural environment. However, on the other hand, the very representation of the wasteland might be a precondition for recognizing it and making a different kind of television. Occupying a television wasteland gives Beckett a space to respond artistically to the consumerist ideologies of television, in a marginal zone that is given over to programming of cultural rather than economic value. The makers of Beckett's television work aimed at cultural excellence and enrichment, and the dissemination of complex and enlivening output. The final section of this chapter looks outward to analytical frameworks and possible comparators that invite new ways of situating Beckett's work within television and in wider cultural contexts. Ultimately, the argument is that Beckett's TV plays draw on and deconstruct modernist distinctions between art and wasteland, and between fruitfulness and sterility (Bignell, 2019b), and so are examples of postmodern television (Bignell, 2009, 158–9).

Beckett's TV plays as Meta-critique

The debate about television as either a wasteland or as fertile ground can be deconstructed by analysing the multiple significance of the audio-visual aesthetics of Beckett's TV work. As a whole, the work evokes a world out of time and space that can be seen as an ecology of emptiness, sterility and exhaustion (Bignell, 2010). Jonathan Kalb interpreted Beckett's plays for television as being about 'Man [sic] existing on his own in a kind of nothingness' (1989, 99), in other words an existential void at the heart of the human is embodied on screen by a represented void, comprising the empty rooms, lone figures and ungraspable beloveds of the dramas. The plays each appear to show an instance of a repeated sequence of actions that have happened before and presumably will happen again. This is perhaps most clear in the empty centre that the walking figures repeatedly trudge around in *Quad*, and the repetition of Part 1 of the piece in the monochrome images of Part 2 suggests an enforced placeless and timeless

routine. Beckett's reflexive commentary on broadcasting and viewership works by making temporal and spatial coordinates uncertain and volatile. Beckett's TV invites questions about presence/ absence, liveness/ archive, time/ timelessness and materiality/ immateriality. The paradox of Beckett's television plays is that they propose television as an empty wasteland and a dimensionless, sterile infinity, but also want to invite viewers to differentiate the works from the deadening consumer capitalist culture that surrounds them, and viewers can understand the plays as a meta-critique. For these reasons, Beckett's plays could be considered alongside other programmes that take viewers out of their own space and time, especially reflexive meta-commentaries on TV viewership and the role of television as an art medium.

The invention of radio and television stimulated a resurgence of spiritualism in Europe because the odd, evanescent sounds and images of these technologies seemed to offer means to communicate with the dead, after the vast losses of the First World War (Sconce, 2000). Beckett's *Eh Joe*, *…but the clouds…* and *Ghost Trio*, focusing on the longing for and conjuring up of an absent loved one, invoke this history. The plays' titles, as Voigts-Virchow points out, 'address three metaphors which may be related to precisely the ontological destabilization of TV: images as *ghosts*, as *clouds*, and as *dreams*' (Voigts-Virchow, 2000–1, 124). Graley Herren (2007) offers a reading of all of Beckett's media work as being about staging a communication with an other, conceived as parallel but different from the self, and relativizing the process of how a medium connects sender and receiver, text and viewer, living and non-living, the present and a memory of it. The dramas' grey, slow and static theatricality looks out of place and out of time or, as Michael Ratcliffe's review of *Ghost Trio* notes 'like a camera in the prehistoric days of moving films, [creating] a world out of time and space' (Ratcliffe, 1977). The shuffling bodies in Beckett's TV plays might be in the wasteland of televisual modernity, figures who are barely alive, conjuring ghosts for themselves out of the darkness.

Both the male figures we believe to be present and real on screen, and the ghostly absent figures they seek, are pictured in similarly grey, ill-defined ways and everyone exists in a grey wasteland. Indeed, in as much as they are creative figures in the limited sense of seeking visions of a desired other, they are aligned with the creators of television who broadcast moving visions of others across the airwaves. In *Nacht und Träume*, the repetition of A's actions by the identical figure of B suggests a *mise-en-abyme* in which either, both or neither A or B might be dreams (Herren, 2000). This possibility allows the viewer to speculate that all television images are somehow phantoms dreamed up through the agency animating the television apparatus or perhaps by viewers themselves. The dynamics of broadcasting disrupt the categories of self and other, interior and exterior. As Little's (2020) and Anna McMullan's recent studies of Beckett's 'closed spaces' works have proposed, Beckett creates microcosmic worlds that function as testbeds or laboratory experiments to explore ideas of identity and interrelationship. Beckett's rooms 'combine qualities of confined interior space with the sense of a cosmological or ecological system' (McMullan, 2021, 6). The conjuring of absent beloveds into empty rooms by men engaged in reveries and dreams seems like a commentary on television texts as materially present on screen, yet because of their evanescent electronic existence also virtual and absent.

The concept of ecology includes interdependencies between living things and natural objects, and processes of evolution, adaptation and extinction. Television, in genres like wildlife documentary and current affairs, has explored both hopeful or doom-laden visions of the natural environment, making links between the viewer's home, locality or nation and exterior spaces beyond the home, whether local or global. Television is a mediating interface between the here and the there. But as this chapter has discussed, television has its ecology too, and one of the contemporary questions affecting it is whether the twentieth-century form of television, as scheduled broadcasts of freestanding programmes sent to viewers' homes, is an

endangered, waning medium. Television in its broadcast form might either shrink to the margins of media culture or adapt to better fit online, narrowcast multimedia formats designed for delivery via the World Wide Web (Bignell, 2023). In recent years an account of Beckett on screen needs to include not only the free-to-air broadcasts of his work on television but also DVD and online videos disseminated via YouTube or Vimeo, for example. These technologies are not fixed in domestic space and nor is their content broadcast at proscribed times. This removes some of the affective force of Beckett's TV plays' representations of isolated figures in rooms seeking to relate to an external other, since that trope implicitly parallels television's role of offering a kind of belonging to its viewers who watch separately at home but join the imaginary community of the collective audience. Mediums adapt to changing media ecologies (Bazin, 2000) and find new homes amid the culture of media convergence. Ecologies are dynamic, and Beckett's television drama is an example of work that negotiates with the different potentialities for showing, critiquing and embodying the interactions between interiorities and exteriorities, between people and things, and between human agents and cultural institutions. His work asks viewers to consider the ways that these potentialities enable and constrain ecologies of different kinds; human, material, technological and cultural.

Notes

[1] See for example Davies (2006), Garrard (2012), Lavery (2018) and McMullan (2021).
[2] On relationships between theatrical space and televisual space in television adaptations of Beckett's drama, see Bignell (2022).
[3] On the uncanny in theatre, see Taylor (2006).
[4] The music in *Ghost Trio* comprises excerpts from Beethoven's Trio in D minor, op. 70, no.1, known as the 'Ghost'.
[5] Television examples include *Doomwatch* (1970–2), *Survivors* (1975–7), *The Changes* (1975) and *UFO* (1970–3).