

# *Into the void: Beckett's television plays and the idea of broadcasting*

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## Into the void: Beckett's television plays and the idea of broadcasting

*Jonathan Bignell*

In the context of a tradition of critical discussion that characterises Beckett's plays for television (and his other work) as attempts to engage with nothingness, absence and death, this chapter argues that the television plays are critical explorations of the problematics of presence and absence inherent in the conceptions and histories of broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Television as a medium and a physical apparatus sets up spatial and temporal relationships between programmes and their viewers, relationships with which Beckett's television plays are in dialogue. Broadcasting necessarily entails an incomplete encounter between viewer and programme, and a certain risk that the audience will not engage with what is offered to it. Here too, Beckett's television plays stage and explore the potentials of broadcasting and its attendant possibilities of failure. By taking account of the medium's historical and cultural roles, Beckett's television plays can be shown to engage with debates about the operation, social function and aesthetic possibilities of broadcasting.

### **Television and temporality**

There is a long-standing assumption that the television medium's 'essence' is determined by its possibility to relay events and performances live, or to recreate an experience for the viewer that simulates a live broadcast. This essentialism is perpetuated by television's customary broadcast of news, sports events or national occasions at or close to the time of their occurrence, and the concomitant aim for the medium to connect with the lived temporality of its audience. In theoretical terms, this emphasis on liveness

corresponds to an inclination to consider television semiotically as a medium of denotation: a medium that presents, shows and witnesses, rather than re-presents, tells or narrates.<sup>2</sup> However, at the same time, the use of such semiotic methodologies has directed attention away from features of the media that are specific to them because of these methodologies' principle of comparing visual representations with verbal language. For example, the notion that tense in television is always present (because the image is present on the screen to the spectator), whatever the narrative temporality being represented, is based on the denotation that derives from the photographic basis of the television (and film) media. Temporality in Beckett's plays is very often significant, since they deal with experiences that are remembered, retold or re-enacted, often inaccurately or with differences between each version, and they stage the characters' attempts to reinvolve or resurrect something lost and desired. In this respect, they exploit the tensions between tenses in television as a broadcast medium and the assumed temporality of its programming. This argument is the basis of Graley Herren's recent study of Beckett's screen work,<sup>3</sup> which suggests that the dramas work with Henri Bergson's theory of perception.<sup>4</sup> As Herren notes, Bergson argued that 'the present is always already memory, the past masquerading as the present. Thus, in exploiting television's capacity to make the dead seem "live," Beckett is only reiterating the function of perception itself, which always already serves as a memory machine.'<sup>5</sup> As a broadcast medium, television produces an assumption of its collective simultaneous presence to each of a programme's viewers, whether the programme was recorded live or not, but what television shows is necessarily something that is elsewhere, and which has already taken place. Its metaphysics of presence is predicated on absence.

Newly invented electronic media have been consistently associated with paranormal or spiritual phenomena in which absent or dead people are revived.<sup>6</sup> Electronic presence generated anxiety and enthusiasm with the advent of telegraphy, radio broadcasting, television and, more recently, computer communication and virtual reality. Jeffrey Sconce's study of this history shows how spiritualism can be read as a utopian response to the power of electrical telegraphy, and maintains that radio was seized on as a way of communicating with the afterlife, for example. Television,

he argues, 'was another technology for conjuring the dead, the alien, the interdimensional, the uncanny'.<sup>7</sup> The medium could be understood in this way because of its

paradox of visible, seemingly material worlds trapped in a box in the living room and yet conjured out of nothing more than electricity and air. Whereas radio and telegraphy had always provided indexical evidence of distant places and invisible interlocutors (occult or otherwise), television appeared at once visibly and materially 'real' even as viewers realized it was wholly electrical and absent. [. . .] Its ghosts were truly ghosts – entities with visible form but without material substance.<sup>8</sup>

The invocation of versions of a past in *Eh Joe* (1966) and . . . *but the clouds* . . . (1977), and of absent beloveds in those two plays and in *Ghost Trio* (1977), seems to match the history that Sconce describes, and to operate as a commentary on it as well as a staging of its paradoxes of communication.

But it is important to separate the representation of absence that is so central to Beckett's plays from the negative theology which attributes a Romantic and transcendental presence to this absence. It is certainly the case that there is an absent beloved in *Ghost Trio*, and another absent beloved and an ungraspable past for M in . . . *but the clouds* . . . , an illusory representation of grace in *Nacht und Träume* (1983), a dead and absent beloved in *Eh Joe* and an empty centre in *Quad* (1981). The personae of the plays constitute themselves in relation to these absences, but this does not posit the absences as the origins or centres of meaning. Instead, the personae are constituted as subjects in relation to these absent objects of desire, and both subject and object are constitutive of each other. The plays are the drama of this mutually interdependent relationship, and the plays move towards the recognition of this relationship for their personae and thus, ideally, for the audience. Within some of the plays, present figures draw attention to their performance status and the possibility of conjuring up an image of the absent other (visually presented, for example, in the image of the woman M1 desires in . . . *but the clouds* . . . as a superimposed television image). Drawing attention to absence becomes equivalent to drawing attention to presence, in the context of the simultaneous presence and absence of the signified in television.

There is an ambivalent temporality produced in the relationship

between image and voice in Beckett's television plays, since there is potentially a temporal separation between the two. A voice implies the presence of a speaker, and easily if not definitively establishes a temporal moment of enunciation in relation to which a past and a future may be constructed in the discourse that is enounced. Although the visual image on screen may be present to the viewer, it can be difficult or impossible to establish whether the image represents a past, a present or a future in narrative terms. The voice in *Ghost Trio* is able to predict the movements of the male Figure, so that the action of the drama seems to be brought into existence in a virtual space. The voice in *Eh Joe* may be the product of Joe's consciousness, or Joe may be the product of the consciousness of the voice. W and M2 in . . . *but the clouds* . . . are summoned into existence by M1. . . . *but the clouds* . . . uses repetition, ambiguity and the absence of dialogue, and the ventriloquism by M1 of W's recitation of Yeats's poem 'The tower', to retain a ghostly and fluid quality in the image, at the same time as drawing attention to the mechanical reproduction and apparent fixity provided by the television technology. Both M2 and W appear or reappear as if they were ghosts. The evocation of phantom-like figures summoned up by memory is especially significant in . . . *but the clouds* . . . and in *Ghost Trio*, where their simultaneous presence but ambiguous status as present or past is enforced by the use of superimposition and their presentation in central lighted areas of the screen frame, surrounded by indefinite dark shadows. The dreamt self B in *Nacht und Träume* is represented in a way which allows him to seem to be the projection of the dreamer A's mind, since the technical effect of a 'wipe' is used to expand the space occupied by B in the frame until it takes over the whole of the screen. The image of the B sequence seems to grow out of A's space while he sleeps. However the repetition of A's actions by the identical figure of B, once this new image has taken up the whole of the screen space, suggests a *mise en abyme* in which either, both or neither the A and B sequences might be dreams. The effect of this is to displace the activity of witnessing all of the images on to the 'dreaming' of their creator, the agency of the television apparatus that delivers them or even the television viewer.<sup>9</sup>

At the start of *Ghost Trio*, Voice draws attention to the fact that the visual images are all in shades of grey, thus remarking implicitly on the unusual fact that the play was recorded in monochrome

at a time when television programmes were made in colour. The title of *Ghost Trio* clearly alludes to the notion of death, and the paradoxical life after death that a ghost represents, offering an internal significance for the greyness inasmuch as it might connote ghostliness. *Ghost Trio*'s single character, Figure, holds a cassette player in his hands and at intervals the soundtrack introduces phrases from Beethoven's 'Ghost' Trio, one of the intertexts that might explain the play's title. But with further relation to television specifically, the phenomenon of shadowed edges around the edges of shapes within a picture (caused by inaccurate aerial positioning or weather effects) is called 'ghosting' and is particularly noticeable in monochrome pictures and in images with strong contrasts of dark and light, like those in *Ghost Trio*. The grey that is used for all of the images in the play is also the colour that a television screen takes on when it is switched off. As well as the multiple connotations of greys and monochrome as signifiers within Voice's monologue and the play's visible action, setting up relays and patterns of connotation around death, ghostliness and a forlorn and exhausted tone, monochrome has material significance in relation to the choices of television *mise en scène* and the meaning of monochrome for producers and audiences at the time of production. Colour television in Britain was first broadcast in 1967, on the BBC2 channel. By 1977, much of the viewing audience was watching television in colour habitually, and the use of monochrome was most common in repeated programmes from the past, and occasional news footage. Their lack of colour distinguishes Beckett's television plays after *Eh Joe* from the programmes surrounding them in the schedules of the time, and has connotations of the past. This in itself produces another kind of ghostliness, whereby the productions are dislocated from the temporality of television's present at the time of their broadcast, and offer frameworks for interpretation that link them to earlier 'dead' modes of television production that they seem to revivify.

Across Beckett's plays for television, audio-visual forms and narrative temporalities adopt and implicitly comment upon the cultural histories of television as an apparatus that plays on hesitations between substantial and insubstantial, present and absent, living and dead. Television broadcasting technology operates by sending audio-visual signals that arrive almost instantaneously on the screen of their viewer, constructing a present moment that

has been important to the promotion of the medium as a window on the world, live and direct. But each moment of a broadcast is evanescent, vanishing as the scanning beam of the cathode ray tube moves on to shape the next visual frame. While programmes may be broadcast live, the images they show necessarily represent somewhere other than the viewer's space, and while appearing in the present of viewing time they may be images that have been recorded and reshown. The insistently present television image is thus always haunted by the possibility that what is conjured up is an image of something that is no longer there, that is always about to vanish or may already have gone. In this respect television and radio are unlike theatre, where performers and audience share the same space and time, and where no transmission technologies intervene to introduce a delay between the time of performance and its reception. Television is also unlike cinema, in which films must always have been made at a previous time and can never be 'live'. Beckett's television plays draw on these hesitations in which the television image is a something apparently conjured out of nothing, the present moment of the play is hedged on either side by what has disappeared or not yet been transmitted, and the here and now of the performance is a representation of a there and then. Memory, loss, dreams and absences in the plays are neither triumphantly recuperated into an achieved presence nor mourned as definitively irretrievable, thus matching the involutions of nothing into something and something into nothing that broadcasting has worked through.

### **The presence and absence of the audience**

The conceptions of medium and audience that Beckett's television plays suggest can be understood in terms of the contrasting implications of broadcasting as dissemination. The original meaning of 'broadcasting' was the scattering of seed over the soil, an activity assimilated as a metaphor and then an accepted designator for the transmission of radio and television signals. Thus broadcasting as dissemination retains the connotations of fertility, growth, renewal and promise. At the same time, both broadcasting and dissemination also signify the control of the process by a single agent, the indiscriminate nature of the distributive act, the necessary delay between casting the seed (or sending the signal) and its arrival at



its destination, and the impossibility of knowing whether the seed or message will take hold and lead to a desired result. Like the discussion of the television image's absence and presence in the preceding section of this chapter, broadcasting as a concept holds together contrasting and mutually implicated notions.

Until the advent of interactive television at the end of the twentieth century, the apparatus of television transmission and reception had a single form. This consisted of centrally generated broadcast signals received by a mass audience that was situated in a different physical space from the space of transmission. The audience was imagined as a large public group, so that John Durham Peters can describe the ideal of broadcasting as 'an idealized configuration among speakers and audiences. It conjures visions of the agora, the town meeting, or the "public sphere".<sup>10</sup> But the audience was nevertheless atomised by its separation into single viewers or small groups watching their television sets or listening to their radios. The spatial distinction between transmission and reception entailed the necessary non-response of the audience to whom a broadcast was addressed, situating a gap, delay or absence as a constitutive fact of communication. In this broadcast model, the viewer or listener is posited as a destination or receiver, but cannot be present as an interlocutor. The absence of the viewer in this model of broadcasting haunts it, and is remedied by attempts to provide channels of response from the audience back to the broadcaster, such as audience surveys, letter-writing to producers, or 'right to reply' programmes where individual viewers' concerns could be debated. Within programmes, acknowledgement of the audience is carried out by the viewer's solicitation or delegation via representatives. Viewer delegates in television include representations of internal auditors or addressees, and visible or audible audiences within programmes. In television programmes other than Beckett's drama, such as chat shows or situation comedy, audience groups are seen and heard in programmes with the function of standing in for the television audience. They applaud, laugh, groan or otherwise comment on the programme in the ways that home viewers are imagined to do. By contrast, television drama almost never uses this address to the viewer, since the positioning of the audience for the programme is different, and closer to the notion of spectatorship deployed in cinema. In the case of television drama or cinema, the codes of camera point of view, editing and sound

work to hollow out a provisional space or position for the viewer to occupy, a place from where the diverse components of the narrative can make sense and to which they are directed.

In Beckett's work for television, there are figures who act as delegates for the viewer, inasmuch as they are addressees within the fictional world. These figures are not straightforwardly images of a television viewer, but their function as addressees situates them structurally in a parallel role. They include Joe in *Eh Joe*, who is the addressee of Voice. Later, Figure in *Ghost Trio* seems at least some of the time to be addressed by Voice, and Voice explicitly addresses the television viewer at the start of the play by introducing him or her to the *mise en scène* and the schema of reception she expects. She orders the viewer to 'tune accordingly' and to 'keep that sound down', for example. In . . . *but the clouds* . . . , M1 addresses his voice to the viewer and tells his own story, accompanied by visual representations of aspects of that story such as M2's departures 'to walk the roads'. Beckett's television plays work within a tradition of hollowing out the place of the viewer or listener, directing an address to him or her, and including figures within the text who may stand in for the television viewer as a destination for communication. However, Beckett's plays also undercut or complicate the achievement of a communicative relation between sender and receiver, both within the diegesis of the plays and in their address to their viewer. What is at stake here is whether communicative address and interaction can establish a substantial relation between two figures, or whether it is evidence of an absence of relation, a something that is actually a nothing. Most obviously, in *Eh Joe* the accusation and questioning by Voice produces no reply from Joe, and in *Ghost Trio* the instructions to the viewer from Voice might not be obeyed and there are some mismatches between Voice's statements about what Figure will do and what he visibly does. In . . . *but the clouds* . . . , M1 repeatedly revises the narrative he tells about himself, and M2 re-enacts a simple sequence of movements so that M1, and thus the camera, and the play itself, can 'make sure we have got it right'. These stagings of communication within the plays, and between the plays and their viewers, can be understood as working through the non-communication inherent in the nature of broadcasting itself, where messages may not arrive, may not be understood or may fail to produce a desired effect.

In a European broadcasting context, the relationship of sender

and addressee takes a specific form. The notion of broadcasting as the casting of seed that may fruitfully grow in the soil of the audience community is evident in the British concept of Public Service Broadcasting, where the universally available broadcast of material considered socially valuable, like Beckett's work, aims for its future productivity for its audience. Beckett's British television plays following *Eh Joe* were all presented under the auspices of *Arena*, BBC2's flagship arts programme, and this is highly significant for their institutional status and their address to their audience. For the majority of television viewers, arts television programmes are their primary access to the arts.<sup>11</sup> This has the effect of ensuring continuity of television coverage of the arts, but it also reinforces the ghettoisation of arts programmes and the divisions between an assumed minority audience of informed viewers and an ignorant majority. The bridge between the audience and the art is most often the personality, whether a television personality acting as presenter or the personality of the artist proposed as the source and explanatory context for the work. For example, Melvyn Bragg led the presentation of *The Lively Arts: Shades* (1977) and interviewed Martin Esslin about Beckett's life and work in the programme. Beckett's *Ghost Trio*, . . . *but the clouds* . . . and *Not I* (1975) appeared in *Shades* as artworks that were felt to need intermediary figures between them and the audience. Bragg brought an already distinguished reputation as a cultural commentator and public intellectual that suited both the presumed difficulty and prestige of Beckett's work, and also promised that he would be an accessible and reliable conduit for its understanding by the audience. The commissioning of original dramas by Beckett as a writer associated with theatre, and also the presentations of his theatre plays on television, functioned as advertisements for theatre as art, and could be justified by broadcasters as a means of supporting theatre as a national cultural institution. For the producers of Beckett's plays for television, an interest in audience reception and the need to engage the audience co-existed with the opportunity to dismiss negative audience responses and small numbers of viewers on the basis of the public service remit of the BBC in Britain and SDR in Germany, which was to present 'the best' of arts culture as defined by professional television personnel and an informed reviewing culture in the press.<sup>12</sup> Beckett's work was admired by a cultural elite who shared interests in a common European legacy

of knowledge, taste and experience. He was a totem for a culturally powerful group with links to arts production and television broadcasting, and this made possible the formation of networks of personnel and financial support for television programmes about Beckett and programmes that would broadcast his theatrical and literary work.

Historically, in Britain there has been a long-standing assumption that television in itself is not valuable, but becomes so when it transmits something valuable in a democratic and socially useful way.<sup>13</sup> Beckett's work benefited from this ideology inasmuch as it was conjoined with aims to bring high culture, such as literature, theatre or music, to a wider audience. But Beckett's plays could not be assimilated into the other means for television to acquire value by making use of its supposed privileged relationship to reality, exemplified by broadcasting public events, or connecting with public sphere concerns via news or current affairs programmes. Television broadcasts of Beckett's work are not 'popular' or 'commercial' television, but, inasmuch as television is regarded as a bad object, it functions as the other against which valuable forms of culture or cultural viewing practice are constructed. Since the viewing practices of television have been understood as variable, distracted, domestic and private, the identification of aesthetic value in programmes by assuming an attentive, concentrated, public and socially extended viewing of them, such as is given to art cinema, serious theatre or painting, poses problems for television producers and academic evaluation. The mode of viewing required for sensitive aesthetic judgement seems alien to the medium. It is in this context that criticism has addressed Beckett's television work as valuable because of its difference from the programmes surrounding it, and its requirement of a different mode of viewing engagement from that which is assumed for those other surrounding programmes. In other words, Beckett's television work has been praised for not being like television. The disparagement of television in general as a trivial medium works as the pre-established negative against which Beckett's plays are set, redeeming television from itself. If television is nothing, it is argued, Beckett's plays can be something valuable.

This hope for the medium acts as an antidote to prevalent views (emerging in the 1950s and 1960s) among intellectual commentators that television was a cultural void. As Jeffrey Sconce explains,

‘the medium’s distinctive “electronic elsewhere” became instead an “electronic nowhere”. Rather than portray television as a magic means of teleportation, these more ominous portraits of the medium saw television as a zone of suspended animation, a form of oblivion from which viewers might not ever escape.’<sup>14</sup> Critics have valued Beckett’s television plays as ways for viewers to understand and explore problems of identity, death, love and meaning in general, countering assumptions about television’s role in cultural dumbing-down. Jonathan Kalb, for example, claims that ‘television has been dominated by the narrowly circumscribed formats of commercial programming since its birth, and those formats have contributed to egregious, worldwide psychological changes: shrinking attention spans, discouraging reading and encouraging passive, narcotized habits of viewing art of all kinds’.<sup>15</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi has argued that Beckett’s plays for television and radio educate the audience about their means of production: ‘Beckett foregrounds the devices – radio sound effects, film and video camera positions – and forces the audience to acknowledge the presence of these usually hidden shapers of texts.’<sup>16</sup> Thus the plays are argued to empower the audience by requiring attention to the conventions of signification in the medium, and redressing its more usual tendency towards cultural ‘oblivion’.

This quasi-religious and hopeful vision of broadcasting as communication is evident in Beckett’s television work, not only in the historical circumstances of its production in Britain and Germany but also in the risk, hope or belief in communicative effectivity that the plays’ dialogic scenarios depend on. The pedagogic functions of *Voice in Ghost Trio* and her relation to the viewer, which include the authority of *Voice*’s tone and her instructions as to how to view, could be interpreted in relation to the ideology accompanying the BBC’s public service functions. Although Part I of the play introduces the audience to the space, and Part II to the movement of the figure, the third Part of the play has no voice-over. The dynamics of the audience’s relationship to the play therefore change, with the implication that by Part III the viewer will have learned to find his or her place as the audience shaped by the play’s discourse, and thus a communicative relationship will have been achieved. Since the television set is likely to be placed in a room, among the domestic objects of the household, the plays’ focus on domestic interiors that is most striking in *Voice*’s attention to the layout and space of the

room setting both makes a link with the viewer's own environment and also establishes the difference and distance between the represented room and the viewer's own space. It is particularly striking that Voice not only describes the set, the colours and shapes of the items in it and the disposition of the Figure, but also remarks on the technical and material means of the viewer's perception of this information. Voice's command that the viewer should not raise the volume on the television set, for example, is not simply a recognition that the drama is conveyed by means of the camera and sound recording equipment, but also that it is being received on domestic television apparatus in the home of the viewing audience. Again, this not only draws attention to the means of representation in a self-conscious way but also affects the inclusion and exclusion of the audience from the drama. As a conduit for images and sounds, the television apparatus both provides access to those images and sounds, and mirrors the represented room with the viewer's, but also announces the viewer's separation from the moment of image and sound recording and excludes the viewer from the room supposedly matching the one in which he or she sits.

Jonathan Kalb has adopted a version of this argument and argues that, like paintings by Caravaggio, the television plays are like 'windows looking inward on particular souls', and represent 'Man existing on his own in a kind of nothingness'.<sup>17</sup> He also maintains that inasmuch as parallels between the plays' characters and the viewer are established spatially and by narration, that 'nothingness' carries over into the viewing situation. In Kalb's view, Beckett's plays have something to offer, which is an insight into the 'soul' of equivalent value to the insight offered by an Old Master such as Caravaggio. But the soul thus revealed is isolated and surrounded by 'nothingness', a situation that parallels the isolation of the television viewer. The something that Beckett's plays offer is in fact a nothing, or more precisely a revelation of the nothingness that haunts humankind in general. But it is reductive to turn a something into a nothing and to argue that the something communicated by Beckett's drama has a nothing as its content. The result of the argument is that nothing becomes the fundamental ground of existence, and the communicative relationship between television and its viewer is something that acts as a vehicle for staging non-communication and nothingness. It is an argument characterised by pathos and melancholy.

Arguments for the productive and educative functions of Beckett's television dramas match the values of public service broadcasting, and have been made on the basis of critical analyses of the plays' audio-visual forms. Eckart Voigts-Virchow asks: 'How does this formal examination of Beckett's camera plays, then, position their reductive, repetitive, static, monochrome, interior closeness in the TV environment?', and answers that it sidelines them as outdated and rarefied (both rarely seen and aimed at an elite audience).<sup>18</sup> The plays themselves were seen only by a tiny sector of the British population, and the arts programmes that broadcast them or discussed them were predominantly on niche services like the BBC's Third Programme on radio, or arts programmes and late-evening discussion programmes on the BBC2 television channel. Beckett's plays for television and adaptations for television of his theatre work were marginal to the schedules, so that their effectiveness in constructing and communicating with their audience was undercut to some extent by their relationship with the broadcast programming surrounding them.

British broadcasters' policy has been to mix programmes together in the schedule so that audiences might come across them by chance and be stimulated by relatively demanding fare that they might not consciously choose to view. The audience was conceived as a citizenry whose cultural knowledge and involvement could be gently raised by insinuating 'quality' material amongst popular entertainment. Beckett's plays for television need to be understood in relation to British television culture, and the institutional culture of the BBC in particular. The linkage between Beckett's television dramas and the modernist aesthetic that Beckett was perceived to represent functioned through the value of Beckett's name and associations, which played an important role in legitimating the educative and conservational values underlying Public Service Broadcasting. The formal experimentation, theatrical background and admitted complexity of Beckett's television plays supported the claims of the BBC to present the best of contemporary arts practice despite, or even because of, the distance between such practice and the mainstream forms of television dramatic entertainment. For many of the production staff who worked on the realisation of Beckett's television plays, and for many of the Beckett critics who have analysed them, the plays are valuable for two contrasting reasons. They are 'not like television' and thus have a positive value

in redressing the medium's supposed tendency towards dumbing-down its audience. But they are also valuable because they appear to offer a metacritique of what the television medium is as a communication apparatus. The plays are thus understood in a dual role, at once inside television as an inoculation against its more usual triviality, and also outside it at a critical distance from where the plays offer a critique of the television medium that broadcasts them. Again these formulations demonstrate the precarious separations between inclusion and exclusion, and participation and negation, that have appeared consistently in this chapter and which consistently threaten to slip into each other.

Ekart Voigts-Virchow points to the titles of the plays as indications that they refer to the questioning of being through the questioning of television: 'Significantly, his titles address three metaphors which may be related to precisely the ontological destabilization of TV: images as *ghosts*, as *clouds*, and as *dreams*.'<sup>19</sup> Ghosts, clouds and dreams are not produced under the conscious agency of a subject, and are immaterial and intangible. In *Ghost Trio*, Figure thinks he hears an indication of the presence of a woman who does not appear. In . . . *but the clouds* . . . , memory and voice seem to conjure up the ghostly presence of a lover. In *Nacht und Träume*, the play seems to dramatise the experience of a dream or vision. The means of realising these ideas in television form are themselves in dialogue with the assumptions of iconic representation in the medium, supporting those critical interpretations which focus on the plays as metadiscourses about the medium. Inasmuch as the self communicates and stages relations with an other outside itself, it must also be recognisable to itself as an other that another self might communicate with. Similarly, the other must be posed as a potential self with whom the communicating self can establish a relation. Self and other invert and double themselves in the process of communication, and as a precondition for staging that communication.<sup>20</sup> The verb 'staging' is useful for understanding how this works in the plays, because communication is a process in which spatial position and temporal extension provide the perceptible ground for relations between selves to be proposed. Communication in the television plays 'takes place' even if the act of communication and the significance of what may be communicated are undercut and incomplete. Place and stage demonstrate the specific concrete materiality of the communicative



relation in Beckett's television plays, in contrast to the idealisation and abstraction of language and personae that are so often remarked on in Beckett's work.

### **Beckett and the ethics of broadcasting**

The persistent motif of interpreting Beckett's work in relation to philosophical concerns with identity, language and otherness can be recast as a meditation on the communicative relations which are at stake in broadcasting. Beckett's television dramas frequently divide their personae into two; voice and body, present and past, internal and external. One of the consequences of this is that the personae lack a sense of their own identity as comprising a unity between these two parts. Figure's look at himself in the mirror in *Ghost Trio*, and his failure to realise in the present his desire for the absent loved one signified by Beethoven's music, is an example of this. In a similar way, Joe seems unable to recognise Voice as a part of himself. In . . . *but the clouds* . . . , M cannot reconcile himself with M1 and complete a satisfactory narrative connecting his present to the past. Within these terms, there is no necessity for Romantic nostalgia and negative theology. For the interdependent relation between self and other, inner and outer, representation and the real, object and concept, are constitutive of meaning and do not in themselves possess an ethical or moral value. This also explains the divide in Beckett's plays between image and sound, and between body and voice, for this separation works with the possibility that there can be a correspondence between these media of representation, yet also denies their equivalence and translation into each other. Symbolisation, whether in image or language, can be regarded as a form of 'writing' that establishes a constitutive relationship between the real and its representation. Yet this relationship can never be one of equivalence or adequacy. Furthermore, each system of symbolisation has its own particularity as a signifying system, and is necessarily untranslatable into another. The apparent parallels between Beckett's drama and these debates in Western metaphysics emerge from the specific forms of symbolisation and communicative relation that broadcasting depends on, inasmuch as it constructs both a necessary relationship and a necessary non-correspondence between the broadcast and its viewer.

Theoretical discourses about television audiences regard the audience either as an object constructed by television or as a subject empowered to interact actively with it. Audiences are either considered as passive, positioned and interpolated by television or on the other hand regarded as active appropriators of meaning amid a complex social and cultural context. Beckett critics have argued that his television work is important because it is radically different from the mass culture that surrounds it on television, and has a productive role in turning the audience from passive to active viewers, and recognising the homogeneity of the majority of television broadcasting. This is a noble aim, but historical evidence shows that it repeatedly failed and that it was support from institutionally powerful television producers and cultural opinion-formers that brought Beckett's dramas to the screen. Yet Beckett's television plays cannot be dismissed because of this, since broadcasting as a concept and social practice is always predicated on transmission without the assurance of reception or response.<sup>21</sup>

Beckett's backward-looking investigation of what the medium could do and could be drew inevitably on discourses about television that were developed and contested before his first media productions were conceived. These discourses were inherited from discourses about radio in particular, which shaped the concept of broadcast communication as the summoning up of absence into presence, and a reliance on the audience as a public that was constituted by and for programmes but which could not be fully known. Television's inauguration as a programme medium from the early 1930s, its institutionalisation and the development of scheduling, audience address and a requirement to work for the public good, each offer contexts in which norms were negotiated that could then be experimented with by later programmes such as those that Beckett originated. Beckett criticism has repeatedly taken its bearings from his declarations that speaking, writing and communicating are impossible but inescapable, and his screen dramas stage this communicative relation as a structure, theme and formal template for the audio-visual texts he produced. Television as broadcast communication, and television as a medium for self-consciously performing communication and its failures aesthetically, are historically specific potentialities which Beckett's work takes up. As the centre-periphery model of broadcasting wanes with the rise of technologies of media convergence, interactivity

and narrowcasting, and as the ideology of public service is threatened by the marketisation and privatisation of the media, Beckett's television dramas acquire new kinds of significance. They point to the tensions and paradoxes inherent in broadcasting, where 'something' and 'nothing', presence and absence, living and dead, and sending and receiving have shaped the public being of social-democratic societies. Broadcasting is dissemination in good faith, despite its haunting by the prospect that some of what is broadcast will turn out to be a dead letter sent into the void.

## Notes

- 1 Some of the ideas advanced here are developed more fully in Jonathan Bignell, *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). The dates given are for the first broadcast of each television play.
- 2 Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television: a world in action' *Screen*, 18:2 (1977), 7–59.
- 3 Graley Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 4 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. Paul and W. Palmer (New York: Macmillan, 1912).
- 5 Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays*, p. 13.
- 6 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 See Graley Herren, 'Splitting images: Samuel Beckett's *Nacht und Träume*', *Modern Drama*, 43 (2000), 182–91; and Graley Herren, '*Nacht und Träume* as Beckett's *agony in the garden*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 11:1 (2001), 54–70.
- 10 J. D. Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 210–11.
- 11 J. A. Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain* (London: John Libbey, 1993).
- 12 Jonathan Bignell, 'Beckett at the BBC: the production and reception of Samuel Beckett's plays for television', in L. Ben-Zvi (ed.), *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances, and Cultural Contexts* (Tel Aviv: Assaph, 2003), pp. 165–82. See also Bignell, *Beckett on Screen*.
- 13 Charlotte Brundson, 'Problems with quality', *Screen*, 31:1 (1990), 67–90.
- 14 Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p. 131.

- 15 Jonathan Kalb, 'The mediated Quixote: the radio and television plays, and *Film*', in J. Pilling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 124–44, p. 137.
- 16 Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett's media plays', *Modern Drama*, 28:1 (1985), 22–37, p. 24.
- 17 Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 99.
- 18 Ekart Voigts-Virchow, 'Exhausted cameras: Beckett in the TV-zoo', in J. Jeffers (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 225–49, p. 235.
- 19 Ekart Voigts-Virchow, 'Face values: Beckett Inc., the camera plays and cultural liminality', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 10:1/2 (2000–1), 119–35, p. 124.
- 20 Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays*, p. 16.
- 21 Paddy Scannell, 'Love and communication: a review essay', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 1:1 (2004), 93–102.