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This chapter analyses how the aesthetics of black in Beckett's dramas for television illuminate recent theorisations of the significance of texture in television and film, and how Beckett's television dramas reflect on histories of television production and reception technologies. These changing television technologies affect how viewers can make sense of the visual textures and spatiality of the dramas, since visual style needs to be understood in relation to the materialities of production. The chapter centres on a comparison between the spatial and textural relationships of Walter Asmus's 1986 television version of Beckett's play *What Where* (1984), transmitted in Germany as *Was Wo*, and his 2013 reworking of the same drama for the screen. Moving outwards from how black works in the two *What Where* programmes, the chapter explores the significance of light and dark screen space and texture across the much longer history of Beckett's screen work, produced at different times from the mid-1960s to the 2010s. The chapter argues that Beckett's plays can be regarded as explorations of and commentaries on television aesthetics, and especially that they use the apparent nullity of black to draw attention to the representational capabilities of the television medium.

What Where was written for the theatre, and first performed in New York in June 1983. The play's structure is based on a series of interrogations by the figures Bem, Bim and Bom, led by Bam, whose voice, V, is presented via a megaphone separate from the actor playing him on the stage. Each of the figures is identically costumed in grey, with long grey hair, and one after another they appear in an empty, dimly-lit playing area surrounded by darkness as Bam questions each of them. He asks whether information about 'what' and 'where' has been extracted from their victim, and the play alludes to interrogation and torture

but without offering the means to place the action historically or geographically. The German theatre director Asmus, who frequently worked with Beckett and knew him well, helped Beckett to made a television version of the play in 1986 at the studios of the German regional broadcaster Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR). Much later, in 2013, Asmus shot the play again after Beckett's death in a version produced by Australian academic and Beckett specialist Anthony Uhlmann. Uhlmann's version was hosted by the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. It was not commissioned or shown on broadcast television or at the cinema, but made available on the video streaming portal Vimeo. At first, access was limited to invited viewers only, but now the film and documentary are publicly available on YouTube (Uhlmann 2016) and is most likely to be watched on the monitor screens of home computers or on a modern flat-screen domestic television connected to the World Wide Web.

The visual styles of both of Asmus's television productions of *What Where* are different from the staging of the theatre play. The look of the figures is changed, the megaphone embodying V is removed, and the figures' spatial arrangement changes from a three-dimensional composition to a two-dimensional one. In Beckett's production notes (Beckett 1985) made during the shoot at SDR studios from 18-28 June 1986, Beckett headed one of the pages 'Process of elimination'. The whole process of adaptation is indeed characterised by reduction and subtraction from the theatre original. There are only faces and no stage set or other indication of spatial depth or dimension, except that Bam's face appears large while the others' faces are much smaller. Beckett noted 'Colour eliminated' and 'Black ground unbroken', and the faces appear light grey against a uniformly deep black surround. The production team went to elaborate lengths to dehumanise the performers by representing only the lighted faces against this black background, with the rest of their bodies unseen. The performers' faces were made the same oval shape by the addition of prosthetic masking, their

ears were invisible under the gauze hoods they wore, and their voices were electronically slowed down. The 2013 format very closely resembles Asmus's earlier version for broadcast television, with lengthy opening and closing captions, written in a sans serif typeface against a black background, enfolding the main body of the video which lasts about ten minutes. The embedding of a Beckett drama within a framing documentary feature has been a common means of presenting his work for decades, and Uhlmann's online production closely resembles a television programme in form and structure. Larry Held plays Bam on screen and also the voice V (credited separately), and the shapes and composition of the faces against the black surrounding screen space are very similar to Asmus's 1986 version. What is visually different is the texture of the images, and it is the analysis of textural identity that is the main challenge for this chapter. As Lucy Donaldson (2014, 18) puts it: 'Evocation of feeling by means of visual illusion or, to put it another way, the association of sight and touch and their sensory mingling, is at the heart of texture's uniqueness'. Such effects are difficult to both describe and analyse, but are at the heart of how television images (often in association with speech or music) produce their affective as well as intellectual response.

Surface and depth

In both the 1983 and 2013 versions, Asmus fades the faces in and out of vision as if they were intersecting with a plane of light parallel to the television screen. They seem to move out of blackness towards the viewer, speak their lines and then retreat again into the dark. Bam's large, diaphanous face is on the left side of the screen, and three smaller but brighter faces of Bim, Bom and Bem appear on the right. It is as if a planar surface and a source of light enable them to appear, and their appearing and vanishing parallel the play's oscillating relationships of power and powerlessness among the voices. This oddly shallow yet deep plane of visibility questions 'what' and 'where' it is, and the faces seem to hesitate between

material presence and fading into null blackness. By using the technical capabilities of the studio to shoot the faces in different shot sizes and with different levels of light, and then to post-produce a collage of these shots in the same screen frame, appears to bring an impossible set of spaces and times together on the same surface.

Flat compositions represent the studio space as the planar surface of a picture, and refuse its three-dimensionality. As Donaldson notes, this implicitly introduces the notion of texture as used in art:

> Thinking about texture in art then draws attention to the qualities of form and surface, and to the interrelation of material decisions and their functionality, expression and affect. It also underscores the physicality involved in the production of the art object. (Donaldson 2014, 15)

The flat monochrome technique was first adopted for a Beckett adaptation when French director Marin Karmitz made a film version of Beckett's *Play* (1964) in 1966, working closely with Beckett in a Paris studio (Herren, 2007, 171-97). This production used the interior space to explore the possibilities of a frontal relationship that matched the theatre play, in which three figures are stationary in a row of large urns throughout. The studio became a fully abstract space that both retained a link with theatrical staging and also sought to develop montage in ways specific to television (Foster, 2012). The urns and speakers were 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. Cutting provides rapidly-alternating montages of frontal images that transform the theatre play, and the rhythms of editing produce a fugue-like system of combinations of shot sizes and compositions, matching the rapid alternations of the characters' stichomythic dialogue.

The planar surface was also used in the BBC's version of *Not I* (1973) in 1975 and in the SDR adaptation of *Footfalls* (1976) in 1988 which Asmus directed. In each, 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 Billie Whitelaw's mouth surrounded by darkness, gabbling words in close-up, with no cuts between shots, so that the viewer seems to be confronted face-to-face. In *Footfalls*, Whitelaw plays a single lit female figure who 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.

Anna McMullan (1993, 38) calls the space of the 1986 *What Where* a space of memory or fantasy, and like the other dramas discussed here it is certainly not a 'realistic' space. The radical nature of Asmus's productions is starkly revealed when they are contrasted with the *Beckett on Film* (2001) production of *What Where*, directed by Damien O'Donnell. Post-production editing enabled O'Donnell to have the same actor playing the three personae Bem, Bim and Bom, who can appear on screen together. O'Donnell's adaptation is set in a three-dimensional room whose walls are lined with bookshelves, like a library. The set is well-lit, and the furnishings, costumes and neon lighting allude to the spaces of television science fiction (reminiscent of space station cabins in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-9), for example), and help to suggest an oppressive future society that befits the story of repeated interrogations that the text tells. The textures are hard, shiny, and lit by a predominantly harsh white light that shows a functional high-tech space with a coherent design signature.

Textures of black

Beckett wrote the word 'Black' across a diagram of the television screen in his 1985 production notes for the 1986 *Was Wo*, and when Asmus's new *What Where* was first released privately, the accompanying note on the Vimeo web page read: 'This production of What Where is faithful to Beckett's original vision regarding the brightness of the image, it is

therefore quite dark and best viewed in a dark room.' The video is presented integrally with a documentary, *The remaking of Samuel Beckett's What Where*, lasting about 15 minutes. It begins with video documentation of the shoot, in which Asmus is seen spotlit in a dark studio reading Beckett's text, while the actors can be seen in role, their faces also spotlit, with monitors and members of the production crew visible. Uhlmann explains the context of the 1983 invitation from SDR for Beckett to make something for television, then Asmus explains the process of discussion that led to the 1986 television adaptation. At first it was to be a record of the theatre *What Where*, transferred to the studio, but gradually a distinctively different version was created for television broadcast. Throughout the documentary, interview and rehearsal footage is interspersed with archive photographs shot during the SDR production process, implicitly authorising both of Asmus's versions and demonstrating their provenance. Asmus recalls that when Beckett saw the 1986 version, 'he saw it on the screen, and he loved it when it was almost grey, and hardly to be seen'. Darkness is crucial to Asmus's realization of the play, reflecting Beckett's own wishes. Asmus recalls that in 1986 the technical staff at SDR in Stuttgart warned Beckett that professional monitors in the studio might register the images being shot, but they were so dark that viewers at home would not see them.

Asmus comments in the 2013 documentary: 'The Stuttgart version is so diffuse because the quality of the images is not so good because it was so dark and so on at the time.' By 'diffuse' he means that although the 1986 shoot used state-of-the-art technology, there were limits to what could be achieved. Television sets used cathode ray tubes (CRT) that created monochrome images by drawing a beam of electrons across the screen from the top left to the bottom right 50 times per second. The screen displayed an image made up of 625 horizontal lines, created from alternating passes of the electron beam which scribed an image comprising 312.5 lines on one pass and another 312.5 on the next. The image was

imperceptibly woven together from these repeated scans across its surface. At the same time as this brightness (luminance) signal was emitted, creating the outlines of the shapes on the screen, the screen's tiny triads of red, blue and green phosphor dots across its entire surface were selectively stimulated by another scanning beam, the chrominance signal, that added colour to the images. While the luminance signal of 625 line television had comparatively good image definition (compared to the former technology of 405 line images that it replaced), the colour was relatively ill-defined, like a wash of watercolour paint over a sharp pencil outline. By the time that viewers watched Asmus's second version of Beckett's play, modern Light Emitting Diode (LED) and Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) televisions had much sharper images because their picture composition is equivalent to a scanning rate of 1080 lines. For the main contours of light and dark in the image, thousands of tiny diodes in a mesh of LEDs inside the screen are individually controlled. A layer of bright LCDs in front of the LEDs provides colour, high-resolution shapes and outlines for the whole television screen. The combination of these LED and LCD technologies produces much brighter, larger and more resolved images than the CRT television of the twentieth century. Asmus was well aware of the greater precision now available for the faces illuminated against a black background in *What Where*, and noted in the 2013 documentary that: 'Of course the digital technique has much more possibilities to have a very sharp, very precise image quality'.

However, the very precision of the image can detract from the richness of its texture, in inverse proportion to the sophistication of the technologies used to produce it. Contrast ratio is integral to this, and the term refers to the relationship between the light emitted (the luminance) by the brightest white on a television screen compared to the darkest black. A high contrast ratio makes blacks seem deeper, although all dark television images are compromised when the ambient light in the room where they are viewed erases the distinctions between levels of blackness. Television screens have backlighting to increase the

luminance of their images, but are designed to reduce or switch off the backlighting when a mostly or fully black image is shown. Without selective dimming of the backlighting, contrast ratio is greater so white looks brighter and black looks darker. The best way of viewing *What Where* would be on a screen with full-array local dimming, where backlighting reduction can be accurately applied to the dark parts of the image, or on a new OLED set where backlighting is replaced by diodes that emit their own light and can be left switched off and thus completely black. But such precision was not wholly what Asmus wanted, because he wanted to retain tone and texture, rather than expect it to be simulated by the viewer's screen technology, 'so what Ben [Denham, the editor] might do is to reverse it a little bit to get away from the mathematics of the digital to a sort of poetics, to sort of put some poetry back into it which the old way, the old style, may have had in terms of overall atmosphere.'

Asmus's 1986 version was broadcast in a 4:3 ratio of screen width to height, the ratio adopted in classical cinema for the projection of films and in most twentieth-century television, whereas the 2013 version is in 16:9 aspect ratio, used in most contemporary cinema and in the production of contemporary programmes for widescreen television. These changing television production practices and broadcast contexts affect how the viewer can make sense of the drama's spatiality, because they affect compositional proportions. But each version invites the viewer to wonder about the unlit space behind, beside and in front of the faces. Viewers see a black space with a velvety, tangible texture. Or instead perhaps they might perceive the background of the faces as a flat, black, glossy and smooth plane that the faces intersect with, as if they are breaking the surface of a pool of viscous crude oil. The 2013 version both adopts the precision of contemporary image technologies but also uses those resources to recreate the palpably textural feel of earlier analogue aesthetics in a new way. Asmus commented in the 2013 documentary:

> I think the atmosphere of the digital image of course is different as we all know - these music addicts who only hear old records and would never touch a disc - so somewhere in between I guess there are beautiful possibilities to create something new.

In other words, Asmus's approach to texture is a way of recognising and replaying the histories of television production technologies, aesthetics and viewer expectations.

This chapter focuses on texture in relation to visual properties, but Asmus's mention of differences between analogue disc recordings of music and digital audio raises the issue of differences in sound textures too. The 1986 *What Where* is of course a German translation of Beckett's English text, and to a British person at least, the timbre of the voices is relatively deep, harsh and grainy. This is largely the result of mechanical intervention, since the soundtrack was slowed down in the 1986 version. The 2013 version uses actors who are all Australian (though some, like Held, have spent significant time overseas, including living in the UK). The English of the voices, though not especially marked by regional accent, is noticeably Australian in inflection to a British native speaker. The voices are pitched higher, and have a narrower tonal range and lighter timbre than in the 1986 German version. But they eschew markers of national characteristics, such as might be found in 'natural' conversation, for example the rising inflection common in Australian speech. The voices, as they were in Asmus's previous version, are performed so as to match Beckett's direction in the text that they speak without variation of emphasis or pace. In the 2013 documentary, Asmus recalls that after talking with Beckett during the 1986 rehearsals, they arrived at 'an almost mechanic way of speaking', devoid of lyricism or sentimentality. Speech (and other sounds), like television images and paintings, can have texture, as Roland Barthes (1977) noted when writing about the 'grain' of a voice. While further consideration of vocal timbre and performance style is beyond this chapter's focus on visual textures, similar arguments could

be made about the materiality of voice and the textures of sound in the television versions of *What Where*.

Television genealogies

Long before Asmus's adaptations of *What Where*, production methods on Beckett's television plays were unusual in their relationships between image and sound and in the technology used to realise them (Bignell, 2003). One of the similarities between the 1986 and 2013 versions is that both were shot as-live, with multiple cameras. In other words, each actor had a camera and a light just a few feet away from his face, and all of the cameras were shooting at the same time while the lines were spoken in a continuous performance. By contrast, after the waning of live television drama production in the 1970s, the great majority of drama programmes in Western Europe were shot in multiple takes and then edited in post-production to cut the best sequences together. So, in the 1986 version, Asmus was already adopting an outmoded 'theatrical' method of working. In 2013, multiple takes of the four cameras were edited together digitally in post-production, to enable the timing of the piece (visually and in the pacing of the dialogue) to be controlled to within fractions of a second.

By the end of the 1960s programmes in Western Europe were also being made and broadcast in colour, whereas Beckett's television plays were in monochrome. This made them unattractive to audiences (Bignell 2009, 176-84), and monochrome was a deliberate and significant choice for their producers. So, in the context of a focus on Asmus's use of black, it is important to consider the significance of black in the earlier genealogy of Beckett plays for television. For example, *Ghost Trio* (1976) was made for inclusion in a BBC arts feature, *The Lively Arts: Shades* in 1977 and in the same year in a German version, *Geister Trio*, for SDR. The drama opens with a wide shot of a set with a window, door, bed and a stool on which a dishevelled male figure (F) sits. An unseen female voice, V, introduces the viewer to

the shapes and components of the set before F makes a series of moves around the room, appears to hear music, and finds a boy who seems to indicate wordlessly that an expected female visitor will not arrive. Right at the start of the play, V 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 is broadcast in monochrome. When the critic Sean Day-Lewis (1977) reviewed the broadcast for the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper he drew attention to the plays' dim shadows: 'The shades are all grey, 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.'

Ghost Trio's title clearly alludes to death, and the paradoxical life after death that a ghost represents, offering an internal significance for the play's visual greyness inasmuch as it might connote ghostliness. Moreover, the phenomenon of shadowed edges around the edges of shapes within a television picture (caused by inaccurate aerial position or weather conditions) is called 'ghosting' and is particularly noticeable in monochrome pictures with strong contrasts of dark and light, like those in *Ghost Trio*. The grey in all of the images in the play is also the colour that a television screen of the period had when it was switched off, because the inner face of the glass CRT television tube was coated with a grey fabric-like material. So, 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. Lack of colour distinguishes Beckett's television plays from the programmes surrounding them in the schedules of the time and has connotations of the preceding, pre-colour era. Asmus's versions of *What Where* would be perceived as anachronistic in form and realisation. This in itself produces another kind of ghostliness, whereby the productions are dislocated from the television present, and linked to earlier 'dead' modes of television production. Eckart Voigts-Virchow (1998, 227), incorporating a reference to the dull, grainy

texture of the plays' images, contends 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.' The terminology of the comparison between the matt grey grain of the television image in Beckett's plays versus the bright, glossy smoothness of contemporary screens is both a metaphor for this contrast between anachronism and modernity, and also a literal description of how materially different Beckett's old-fashioned screens and modern screens actually look.

Quad (1984) was shot in colour at the SDR studios and screened on both SDR (as *Quadrat 1 + 2*) and BBC television in 1982, and thus conformed to the conventions of colour transmission at the time. The play presents a square of lines on the studio floor, with diagonal lines connecting their corners, and the entire piece is shot from one overhead camera position. The performers appear one at a time from the dark surrounding space, and move in criss-crossing patterns around the square and its diagonals, before disappearing again into darkness. The shrouded figures of indeterminate sex each avoid the centre of the square when they approach it, before resuming their paths along the lines. Patterns of movement and the question of why the figures move as they do are left open to interpretation, and there is no dialogue or voice-over to frame the action. Beckett's original screenplay aimed to use coloured light systematically for each of the four performers, in parallel with their differently coloured costumes, but the lighting system was abandoned because of problems during production (Fehsenfeld, 1982, 360). Recording in colour for *Quad* part one and then broadcasting monochrome for part two draws additional attention to the possible significance of black and white. Not only its dramatic form, but also the textures and tones of the play's images, multiply interpretive questions in a similar way to the earlier, wholly monochrome plays.

There is a ghostly and fluid quality in the images of … *but the clouds* … (1977), created by repetition, ambiguity and the absence of dialogue, and the ventriloquism by the male figure M of the female W's recitation of the Yeats poem that supplies the play's title. At the same time these features draw attention to the mechanical reproduction and apparent fixity provided by television technology. Both M and W are said to 'appear' or 'reappear' autonomously, as if they were ghosts summoned from off-screen space in the same way that the faces in Asmus's *What Where* versions appear and reappear. They are living, moving faces but bodiless and mask-like, resembling the plaster death-masks sometimes made in Europe in the nineteenth century, for example, to memorialise the dead. As is often the case in Beckett's screen dramas, close-up shots at first seem to follow the television (and cinema) convention of revealing psychological depth, interiority and character. By contrast, the close-ups on faces in *What Where* have minimal expressivity and their white make-up and abstraction from the rest of the performers' bodies seem to fetishize their surfaces, behind which there is no assurance of the depth that underpins dramatic characterisation. The reflexivity of the television plays gives particular prominence to their performative features (Bignell, 2018), inasmuch as they self-consciously perform and deconstruct the capabilities of television representation.

Intermediality and medium specificity

Twentieth-century adaptations of Beckett's theatre work were recorded in studios, in long takes with few cuts, so their form associates them with theatre's linear, continuous performance. At the same time, a concentrated form of spectatorship is required by Beckett's television plays and this connects them with the concentrated gaze of cinema rather than the casual glance associated with television viewing (Ellis, 1982, 50). Whereas the film spectator is encouraged to give full attention to the screen because of the darkness of the cinema, the

surrounding sound and the commitment to the film produced by paying for a ticket, the television viewer has been regarded as a glancing and often inattentive spectator. The textural quality of film is important to the perceived differences between media too, since film has a luminous, limpid quality while video has a narrower contrast ratio and less luminescence, and (until HD) poorer image definition. Those dramas that Beckett wrote for television, and also the screen dramas that were adaptations of plays written for another medium, adopt structural, textual and spectatorial conventions from media other than those of the medium in which they are experienced. Many of Beckett's screen dramas are intermedial in these ways, inviting analytical approaches that address their borrowings, reworkings, transgression of boundaries and questioning of medial identity (Bignell 2019). The fact that Beckett's work seems explicitly interested in the specificities of medium's identity might in fact be a lure that leads instead towards the volatilization of the notion of medium itself (Bignell, 2010). The title of Beckett's first screen work, *Film* (1964), designates the specificity of celluloid as a production and exhibition medium, and a surface separating one space from another as the screen does in a cinema auditorium. This interest in surfaces can also be seen in the camera's attention to textures in *Film*, for example the skin of its protagonist (played by the ageing film star Buster Keaton), especially in shots that focus on his eyelid and his hands, and shots of a tall decaying brick wall in the film's opening scene and later the badly plastered walls of the protagonist's room.

The medium of 35 mm cinema celluloid film was first adopted for a Beckett screen adaptation when French director Marin Karmitz made *Comédie*, a film version of Beckett's *Play* in Paris in 1966 (Herren 2007: 171-97). On film, Karmitz was able to exaggerate and control contrasts of light and dark, and the sharpness of outlines, much better than television technology could achieve at the time, and the film was shown on a large cinema screen at the 1966 Venice Film Festival where lighting conditions would have made these effects very

striking to the audience. This production used a front-facing arrangement of three speakers, as in the theatre play, with the three figures each encased in a large urn. But Karmitz also used montage in ways specific to cinematic technique. The urns and speakers are suspended in a dimensionless space that is only comprehensible through the relative sizes of the figures in the image: large if they are near to the camera, and small if they are far away. Cutting between close and distant camera positions provides rapidly-alternating montages of frontal images that transform the theatre play, and the rhythms of editing produce a fugue-like system of combinations of shot sizes and compositions, matching the rapid alternations of the characters' speech. As Graley Herren (2010, 400) has noted, Asmus's use of strongly contrasting back and white in his versions of *What Where* on television seem to derive from Beckett's experience with Karmitz on film.

As Jonathan Kalb (1989, 100) has pointed out, contrasts between light and shadow and the compositional arrangements in Beckett's work recall Caravaggio's paintings, though the painter's evocation of the tints of human skin against darkness, and especially his placement of foreground objects to generate spatial extension into the viewer's space, are significantly different from the planar compositions of the settings in Beckett's televised plays. Nevertheless, Kalb (1989, 99) argues that like Caravaggio's work, the television plays are like 'windows looking inward on particular souls' and represent 'Man [sic] existing on his own in a kind of nothingness'. Blackness on screen becomes a metaphor for existential 'nothingness', by analogy with the limpid, glossy black backgrounds of the paintings. The reduction of the visual field to self-consciously two-dimensional surfaces and geometric arrangements recalls twentieth-century abstraction and Modernist painting, with their emphasis on the picture plane and reflexivity about technique. But some of the effects of depth produced by light, figures and darkness are similar to Renaissance religious art, and these different traditions load the plays with potentially elusive and ambivalent meanings.

The television screen was rectangular in the 1970s, providing a frame around the image, and rectangles in Beckett's screen work can be interpreted as both reflexive allusions to the medium and also as references to the framed rectangles of paintings in a gallery. The effect of subdividing the rectangular space within the frame is to energise parts of the space and to suggest relationships between the frame and the spaces demarcated within it. Painterly abstraction using geometric forms seems to have been behind Beckett's principles of image composition, such as the grey squares representing the setting in *Ghost Trio* or the lighted circles of *…but the clouds…* The room in Part One of *Ghost Trio* is represented as a series of rectangles, becoming a two-dimensional and pictorial series of forms. The movement of the sole male protagonist in *…but the clouds…* is across the plane of the set in left-to-right directions, entering and leaving a spotlight that leaves the surrounding area completely dark, whereas movement in *Ghost Trio* is into and out of the set, from the front to the back. In *…but the clouds…* there is an almost immobile male figure and in the closing moments a static female figure, returning to a static framing on the television screen, just as in *Ghost Trio* the Figure returns to a position that recapitulates the opening shot. The two plays use similar ideas of the picture plane and the flatness on the television screen of three-dimensional objects and spaces. In *Quad*, a static camera frames a rectangular shape on the studio floor. In the 1983 SDR transmission of Beckett's *Nacht und Träume* (1984), the wipe effect that creates the shift from the 'real' space in which a lone male figure sits to a dreamed space in which he features in his own reverie is also parallel to the panning of a camera across the surface of a planar picture.

Beckett's plays encourage attention to the tones, textures and forms within the image in a way that is close to the conventions of painting, art cinema or television with high production values in settings or costumes. Static compositions and geometric figures present the television viewer with an image which invites the movement of the eye across it, as a

composition and a surface rather than a window through which action and movement are perceived, counteracting the assumption that television spectatorship is passive (Ellis, 1982, 137). But the images of Asmus's *What Where* and other television versions of Beckett's plays the not the same as looking at art. Asmus's adaptations of *What Where*, for example, create a dialogue between the planar surface of a picture and the spatial and temporal extension of action that characterises the ongoing broadcast flow of television. The appearance and reappearance of the faces in *What Where*, rhythmically and repeatedly, are the most obvious examples of this. In addition, the requirement of attention that contemplation of art implies is reconfigured for the domestic and private experience of television viewing. Beckett's dramas negotiate a position between art for television, art on television, and television as art.

Viscosity and value

Television Beckett seems alien to the medium's identity inasmuch as television has been characterised by temporal flow, lightness, evanescence and populism. Since the viewing practices of television have been understood as fickle and distracted, the identification of aesthetic value in programmes by attentive, concentrating viewers seems alien to the cultural identity of the medium. But a Modernist aesthetic can be traced in Beckett's plays written for television, exemplified by the simultaneous reduction and enrichment of verbal and image textures, and the foregrounding of geometrical forms and music. This concentration and reflexivity has been noted by scholars such as Linda Ben-Zvi (1985), Enoch Brater (1985), Stan Gontarski (1983, 1986), Anna McMullan (1993) and Catherine Russell (1985). The audiences and viewing practices that might be assumed for art cinema, avant-garde theatre or painting, in which slowness and depth involvement are invited mean that Beckett on television seems not to be like television.

Disparaging views of television emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and as Jeffrey Sconce (2000, 131) 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.

Critical work on Beckett's television work such as Jonathan Kalb's (1994, 137), 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.

Beckett's refusal of colour for almost all of his television dramas can certainly be seen as a counter to the assumption, beginning in the USA once technical and regulatory standards for colour television were established there in 1953, that 'color [sic] viewing as an experience is more immersive, expansive, and both more realistic and more sensational than viewing monochrome' (Murray, 2018, 9). These assumptions underlay British resistance to colour television, which appeared potentially gaudy and sensational, so that British channels only began colour services in 1967. By repudiating colour, Beckett's grey and black images seem more serious and analytical. As Linda Ben-Zvi (1985, 24) and others have argued, on this basis theorists can claim 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.' Thus, the plays are argued to empower the audience by

requiring attention to the conventions of signification in the medium, redressing its more usual tendency towards cultural 'oblivion'.

In terms of texture, Beckett's screened plays in general, and Asmus's *What Where* adaptations in particular, are viscous, sticky and deep, in contrast to the conventional attitude that the television medium is light, flowing and shallow. They foreground the material base of the image, and the historical contingencies of its production at a particular time. Moreover, the problems of interpreting the non-naturalistic action and spatiality of the plays draw attention to the role of the viewer as interpreter. For Donaldson (2014, 31): 'The sense of textuality as a layering of influences and echoes of references and experiences creates an impression of thickness, that a text gains richness through multiple layers, and of density, as the reading process packs many layers together.' This kind of awareness of interpretation as a relational and material activity was what the influential theorist of communications, Marshall McLuhan (1964, 313), for example, was keen to emphasize:

> The TV image is not a still shot. It is not a photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light through, not light on, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture … the viewer of the TV mosaic, with technical control of the image, unconsciously reconfigures the dots into an abstract work of art on the pattern of a Seurat or a Rouault.

The viewer is then a sort of artist, participating in the process of representation, and is no longer the alienated consumer of a fragmentary commodity object. McLuhan's references to sculpture, and the action of shaping the image, conjure the significance of tone, texture, depth and sensory engagement which guided Asmus's realizations of *What Where* on screen. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) have argued, media can be regarded as processes of mediation, rather than established representational systems through which a rendering of

reality might pass. Thinking in this way leads to considering media as intermediaries that shape both the content of their representations and also their audiences, in a mutually defining process. Media are ways of establishing relationships between people and the world, thus actively engaging their users rather than keeping media separate from humankind. The choices made in the technological, electronic and material production of the images and sounds in the video studio negotiate with the limits of the domestic screen equipment within the viewer's space. The textures of black in the television versions of *What Where* engage their viewer's senses and invite a hesitation about the viewer's relationship with the screen's surface and apparent depth, its lush and enigmatic velvetiness, and with the figures who emerge from it towards the viewer and disappear back into a null space that is both full and empty.

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