

HAPPY DAYS: FROM STAGE TO SCREEN. A WAY TO APPROACH SAMUEL BECKETT AND HIS ABSURDITY TO A PUBLIC THAT IS NOT TRADITIONALLY CLOSE TO HIS TYPE OF ART

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse the project (*Beckett on Film*) that adapted *Happy Days*, one of Beckett's plays, written between 8th October 1960 and 14th May 1961 to the screen. A special attention is given to the strong visual features and to the simultaneous human and unreal nature of Beckett's characters. Finally, it is given a perception on the Beckettian worldwide panorama, which now includes a project on film that made Beckett's wishes of not having variances from what he created prevail.

Keywords: Beckett, theatre, cinema, happy days, absurdness.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo consiste na análise do projeto (*Beckett on Film*) que adaptou *Dias Felizes*, uma das peças de Samuel Beckett, escrita entre 8 de outubro de 1960 e 14 de maio de 1961, ao cinema. No decorrer do artigo, é dada uma atenção especial às características visuais e à natureza concomitantemente humana e irreal das personagens de Beckett. Finalmente, é dada uma percepção global do panorama literário Beckettiano, o que inclui o projeto cinematográfico que fez com que os desejos do autor, de inexistência de variações relativamente ao que criou, prevalecessem.

Palavras-chave: Beckett, teatro, cinema, dias felizes, absurdo.

“And art is the apotheosis of solitude”

Beckett, Samuel

Samuel Beckett, known for his unusual literary works, took a keen interest in visual arts in general. Considering this, it would be expectable that he was influenced by them, which undoubtedly happened. We can see this influence chiefly in his last works, whose power relies more in images than in words.

When analysing Beckett's work, people are often inclined to focus on its literary component, which might mean that the described sensations, mainly because of dazzling descriptions, are often the only component that brings about general attention and that the developed and artistic visuals are ignored. Considering that Beckett wanted – and did – a rich and varied work, which counted with more than one portrayed type of art, instead of focusing only on the beauty of words, this way of analysing him is always reductive, erroneous and unfair.

Beckett was really ahead of his time. And we can see that by analysing the way he resurrected the theatre and rejuvenated the novel. Also, the way he manifests the nude and crude absurdity of life is, for itself, capable of portraying his genius. The expression of the worthlessness of rationality is something that we can see in any page by him. Nevertheless, Beckett's notion of the absurd is an inexhaustible source of meaning excess.

Besides the undeniable importance of Beckett both as a novelist and a dramatist, and even besides the people who indeed read Beckett, the project that adapted this play to the cinema will undeniably approach the author to the public in general, considering that the kind of audience which will watch this film is not necessarily the kind of audience that goes to the theatre or reads Beckett's books

Probably, the project does not make Beckett's work clearer, considering that, in a novel, the reader can fully experience the author's intention by reading the text over and over again, while with a play or with a screenplay time and space are already manipulated. Time is experienced in a very specific and overpowering way while one is sitting in front of a play or a film and cannot be manipulated as one pleases.

It is sometimes difficult to understand Beckett fully and this project appears to give the public a different and helpful perception of his work. Probably academics read his work and even works about it, but the images in this particular film will be essential to approach Beckett to an already mentioned different kind of audience.

Beckett had always refused to allow his works to be made into films. This project was, due to this reason, only made after his death and the cast directors were forbidden to adulterate the original text. It might have been a difficult issue to handle, considering the minimalistic treatment that the author had given to the stage. Indeed, the

way Beckett saw theatre was so different from the standard that his work was and is often called “the antithesis of theatre”.

Alan Moloney, an Irish producer who started his career in production in 1985 as a researcher and ended up as a producer and who is one of the project’s producers, once said that the aim of the project was to make Beckett accessible to wider audiences, as one realizes by reading his interview for *Check the Gate*, a documentary that collected statements of those who participated in the project. Even if the purpose is an understanding of Beckett’s work, “making it accessible” might suggest that the film would become too simplified. This would have been a reason of concern for Beckett.

Generally, cinema assumes the shape of a catching type of art, and grabs general attention much more than scene and books do. While developing this project, known directors, actresses and actors were used, creating an appealing scenario for cinema goers. This is one of the main reasons why the project was appreciated by some who would probably never have had any kind of contact with Beckett’s work. It may be assumed, therefore, that this project is liable to be the required link between the author and hundreds of people.

Beckett intended to explore Art in all its facets, using, for that purpose, words, images and feelings. Feelings are probably the key to understand Beckett completely. Be they pain or helplessness, that is what often makes the reader or the spectator be interested in a piece of art. And Beckett shows us the absurdity of the human condition in all its splendour, which will obviously grab the reader or the spectator.

Absurdity is probably the characteristic that describes Beckett’s work better and assumes, generally, the shape of emptiness. *Happy Days* (1960), one of the author’s most famous plays and the one this study focuses on, would be a great example of this nonsensical speech and of this ecumenical worthlessness.

Beckett was a writer of the vanguard and his work has influenced modern art deeply, especially in its obsession with loneliness, in the belief that human beings cannot act or be happy alone and in the search for love and for the feeling of importance, which could be portrayed by the following fragment of *Happy Days*:

“WINNIE: [Mondaine.] *Well this is an unexpected pleasure! [Pause.] Reminds me of the day you came whining for my hand. [Pause.] I worship you, Winnie, be mine. (...)* (Beckett, 1986: 166)

There are several contemporaneous authors who insist on saying that Beckett’s influence in their work was crucial, such as Peter Brook (born 21 March 1925), who,

apart from Beckett, was also strongly influenced by authors such as Shakespeare and Chekhov. Anthony Minghella, who is a writer and film director who directed Beckett's *Play* for the series *Beckett on Film*, referring to the way Beckett influenced him, said:

“I was at my most porous and, for the next four or five years, my thinking, my aspirations, even my handwriting was somehow defined by Beckett. I became obsessed with his writing (...) He's like Bach for me. And if there are two artists who have provided a lifelong compass it would be Beckett and Bach. Both are noted for their severity of line, the dry surface, but underneath there's a volcano, there's lava” (Knowlson, 2006: 280)

This strong influence and the great importance Beckett had in Minghella's artistic life would obviously be vital to the development of the director's work on Beckett.

It is not difficult to understand that often the interest in artists' work diminishes after the moment they die. Indeed, a quick glance at the number of sold book would corroborate this. The opposite happened, though, to Samuel Beckett, whose work started having more fame and importance after his death. Even though Beckett had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 *"for his writing, which - in new forms for the novel and drama - in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation"* (in http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1969/), his work had been unjustifiably derelict and is sometimes regarded as painfully unclear.

Beckett's plays were often dramatized by different people and in different places. The project *Beckett on Film* started in a Beckett festival, which took place in Dublin in the year of 1991 (according to an interview for the New York Times published on 11 June 2000, by Alan Riding, chapter “The origins of the project”), and was directed by Michael Colgan, the artistic director of Dublin's Gate Theatre (according to the interview already mentioned, chapter “Finding new audiences for alienation”). At the time, the Gate Theatre set nineteen plays by Samuel Beckett, which were, in chronological order: *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Act Without Words I* (1956), *Act Without Words II* (1956), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Rough for the Theatre I* (late 1950s), *Rough for the Theatre II* (late 1950s), *Happy Days* (1960), *Play* (1963), *Come and Go* (1965), *Breath* (1969), *Not I* (1972), *That Time* (1975),

Footfalls (1976), *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), *Rockaby* (1980), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *Catastrophe* (1982), *What Where* (1983) and some radio plays. Colgan took a step further than those who had previously worked with Beckett's work and carried the author from stage to screen, where he had never wanted to be. This meant, not only looking differently at Beckett's work, but also producing it in a different way. The aim was not to film a theatre production, but to turn Beckett's play into a film. Because of this, Colgan needed directors with movie experience. In the chapter "The origins of the project", the reader is informed that Colgan sought out Alan Moloney to be his partner in the project. Besides, and because his aim was to reach a wider audience than the one that already knew Beckett, he used popular actors with appeal to cinema goers and television viewers, such as Julianne Moore or Alan Rickman. Colgan believes now that the public is ready for Beckett, which has not always been the case. Theatre goers often found Beckett's plays bewildering and even depressing. Beckett, however, would consider that all of that was a misunderstanding. Colgan assumes that the passage of time has made Beckett seem less frightening. The plays are the same, but the audiences are different and have overcome the idea that Beckett is depressing and unapproachable.

Before choosing directors, actors and actresses, Colgan faced an obstacle: Beckett had included in his texts exceedingly detailed instructions about how they should be performed and directed. No cuts or gender-bending were permitted and the project did not count with adaptations or inspirations. That is why there was a need of directors who could understand the importance of the text and that is why writer-directors were preferred. The perception that the project was director-led was fundamental to reach a good result.

To move Beckett from stage to screen presented some difficulties, mainly because changing a single word of the text was out of the question and camera movements, editing cuts and close-ups create a different visual effect from the one observed on stage. Performing Beckett, be it on stage or on screen, is a hard issue to handle. Michael Colgan even said, in the interview that has been mentioned, in the chapter "Punishing the cast":

"Beckett is a punisher of actors. He always confines them in the most ridiculous places – in urns, in garbage cans, up to their necks in sand. It's like he has an extreme resistance to the basic reality of theatre, which is the actor [sic]".

Regardless of how difficult performing would be, Beckett demanded no less than perfection from actors and actresses. Not one single variance from his text would

be allowed. In this way, Beckett would be able to maintain alive the true essence of what he had created.

Beckett's characters have that indelible trace that only poetry can draw. They are not those people we usually have contact with in our everyday life. However, they have characteristics that we recognize and that make us identify them as people.

Beckett often introduces contrasting and complementary characters: in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon have a mutual dependence, Pozzo is an arrogant materialist, whereas Lucky is abject but capable of feelings; *Rough for Theatre I* features a blind man and a physically disabled man who think about helping each other in order to reach better lives; *Act Without Words II* has a slow and awkward A and a fast and precise B; *Endgame*, which does not end with a resolution between Clov and Hamm, shows a person unable to stand and a person unable to sit. In *Happy Days*, Winnie talking, forcing herself to be cheerful, clearly expressing forced utterance made of forced happiness, trying to give a happy ending to her wish of having a happy day, working hard to ensure that much, in an endless struggle to devalue little annoyances, while Willie grumbles and ignores her except when she calls him insistently, gives the readers a strong perspective of characters' contraposition and differences. This strong contraposition could make one believe that these pairs act as two halves of one whole.

Beckett tends towards the monologue, improved it as time went by and invented ways to vary it. Both *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape* are almost monologues created around a character, protecting him/her of absolute solitude by creating a reverberated voice. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, an old man is communicating with this own voice he had tape-recorded three decades before; in *Happy Days*, Winnie talks in the hardly visible presence of an almost dumb Willie; in *Play*, Beckett presents a step further on his wish of diminishing the presences on stage and, instead of focusing almost everything in one person, he focuses everything in a part of the human body.

Beckett has been able to provide his audience with an astonishing capacity to vary. No protagonists could be less alike than Winnie (*Happy Days*) and Hamm (*Endgame*); no aging women could be less alike than the cheerful Winnie and the melancholic Maddy Rooney (*All That Fall*, which is not part of the project); no characters could present such a variety of rhythms as the sluggish A and the speedy B (*Act Without Words II*).

Happy Days is an excellent example of the absurdity of life represented in Beckett's work. It features a 40 year old woman, Winnie, buried up to her waist in a mound of sand. She is being swallowed by the ground and her 50 year old husband, Willie, only appears, from his tunnel behind the mound, when she is almost totally covered by sand. Winnie notices the awkwardness of her situation, but does not seem to realise where the trouble is and how illogical and odd it is. She is cheerful during almost

the entire play, which shows us her denial of her fate, and often says that that is indeed a happy day. Her opening words, “Another heavenly day”, start a long monologue in which she continues chattering cheerfully:

WINNIE: *Ah well, what matter, that's what I always say, it will have been a happy day after all, another happy day.*” (Beckett, 1986: 167)

This scenic vision is overwhelming, because the reader is never spared of Winnie’s prison, which was exposed as a sacrificial metaphor. While this happens, Beckett, using Winnie’s voice, points out the human harsh wish to preserve the spirit memories materially, exposing the effect of the allegoric collage of poetic remainders:

“WINNIE: *Do you think the earth has lost its atmosphere, Willie?* [Pause.] *Do you, Willie?* [Pause.] *You have no opinion?* [Pause.] *Well that is like you, you never had any opinion about anything.*” (Beckett, 1986: 161)

The presented settings show a bizarre, unlikely and alienating reality. It is not entirely implausible, considering that there are still a few threadbare lines connecting these scenarios to a believable world, even if it is absurd, useless and made with an ecumenical feeling of emptiness and aimlessness.

This play shows an unusually large investment in the detritus of everyday life. We can see it by analyzing Winnie’s rituals that show us the features of a normal morning routine, creating an opposition with the abnormality of the rest of her situation, like her poor physical ability, visibly displayed in Beckett’s drama. Winnie’s long speeches, optimistic though nonsensical, create an intense theatrical metaphor.

The central theatrical image underlying the play, in which a cheerful woman is being swallowed by the earth, is not what we all expect to see in real life, so, once again, Beckett makes the reader/spectator face absurd situations. And he makes it in his special way: he makes one believe that Winnie’s immersion in the earth is inevitable and progressive like the degenerative aspect of life itself, so one cannot help facing the real nonsense of life.

As always happens in Beckett, besides the metaphor towards the destructiveness of time, the play cannot simply be stuck to a dogmatic allegory, in which case immersion would represent the end of Winnie’s troubles. However, one realizes Winnie is exposed to a hellish light that comes from above just as the ground

grasps her from below. (In *Endgame*, on the other hand, that light is life-giving, even though it does not mean a blessing).

Winnie's anxious need to maintain normality is one of the comic contrasts the play focuses on and it can be observed in the disjunction between Winnie's optimistic tone and the literal gravity of her situation. Anyway, Beckett's fondness for Winnie is unambiguous: she has endless opportunities to be endearing. The actress that plays her role has all the chances to show everything a voice can do, using plenty of tones and emotions, transforming, in this way, mere words into poetry. Winnie is probably Beckett's most heroic character, if this word still has right of admission in the heart-rending landscape of the author's austere stage. While presenting a contradictorily happy and promising world, she escapes from the mortal silence by using the remaining language, even if she is progressively disappearing and the definitive annihilation is guessed.

Indeed, in almost, if not all, of Beckett's plays, language is a means to express language breakdown. When there is uncertainty, it is impossible to reach definitive meanings – and the impossibility of reaching them is one of Beckett's main themes: Godot's promises are vague; in *Endgame*, when Hamm anxiously asks "We're not beginning to... to... mean something?", Clov merely laughs "Mean something! You and I mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that's a good one!" (Beckett, 1986: 108). Beckett does not write mood-pieces or prose-poems; he always presents stories, even if they are often incomplete and hardly focus on one single aspect. Readers are supposed to experience the wreckage that the story has left, so they can experience the true essence of Beckett's works. The fact is that, by the time we face the scenario, be it as readers or as spectators, the story has already finished, and a situation amidst something is being recalled as the only thing that remains. In *Waiting for Godot*, which has aroused plenty of controversies, nothing happens, no development is discernible, there is no beginning and no end. Everything spins around the absent but ubiquitous Godot, who is a kind of distant mirage. Beckett's books are often public confessions by people who cut themselves off and have nothing but the language to fondle, so they create a new language, full of absurd, full of sense, full of life and death, and the author manages to embrace both the old and the new languages.

Beckett is probably the most important playwright of the 20th century, even if a large part of his work is yet unknown to many. The project *Beckett on Film* appears to give birth to another perception of Beckett's plays, widely represented, and is essential for both Beckett's fans and scholars interested in him. It will undoubtedly influence interpretations and it shows a much wider Beckettian panorama.

Beckett's influence can only be compared to the influence of authors such as Shakespeare or Ibsen, whose works have survived innumerable adaptations and

inspired-by stuff. However, academics have been unusually protective about Beckett's work, which probably happens because people who are more concerned with the issue are those who knew about Beckett's demand and who wanted his wishes to be respected by having his plays performed exactly the way he wanted them to be. Indeed, Beckett took a keen interest in the productions of his plays from the beginning of his career as a dramatist (in KNOWLSON, James and Elizabeth. *Remembering Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. P. 280). He wanted everything to be as he had planned and he would not admit one single variance from his text or indications. Also, he made very clear all the details about how his plays should be performed.

Having analyzed some of Beckett's plays in a general sense, focusing particularly on Beckett's *Happy Days*, it may not be inappropriate to assume that Neil Jordan is right when he claims that the only boring thing about Beckett is his commentators. Beckett gives birth to a new world and, at the same time, he shows the world we live in. He presents a senseless world, while he also lets some lines connecting the world he creates to a believable one that is visible to those who understand him a bit more deeply. Still, people tend to think that Beckett's writing is difficult to understand. This might happen because they try to find symbols to clarify the meaning of the plays or look for motivation in the characters, which is often absent.

As time goes by, new adaptations will appear and probably radical changes will be made and shown, highlighting other perceptions of Beckett's work and influencing the general public. *Beckett on Film* will be, however, a manifest mark of a project on Beckett that was conceived with the aim of making Beckett's wishes prevail.

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