De/Construction of Visual Stage Image in Samuel Beckett's *PLAY*

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Abstract:

Dehumanised heads potted in three gigantic urns and illuminated by a swivelling beam of light are characters, prop and setting in Beckett's *Play* (1963), which constitutes the object of the present research. The creation of this grotesque stage tableau is based on the techniques of reduction and fragmentation, which we pretend to analyse through the lens of phenomenology. On the one hand, the static stage tableau is discussed in the light of Arnheim's theory of perception, and on the other hand, we examine the spotlight in terms of its deconstruction force in *Play*.

De/Construcción de la imagen escénica visual en *Play* de Samuel Beckett

Palabras clave:

Teatro. Cuadro escénico. Luz escénica. Fragmentación. Reducción

Resumen:

Cabezas deshumanizadas en tres gigantescas urnas e iluminadas por un rayo de luz giratorio son personajes, atrezo y escenario en Beckett's *Play* (1963), que constituye el objeto de la presente investigación. La creación de este grotesco cuadro escénico se basa en las técnicas de reducción y fragmentación, que pretendemos analizar a través de la lente de la fenomenología. Por un lado, el cuadro escénico estático se analiza a la luz de la teoría de la percepción de Arnheim y, por otro lado, la luz escénica se examina como una fuerza de deconstrucción de la imagen escénica en la obra teatral *Play*.

Introduction

Play, written in 1963, is a turning point towards a minimalistic approach to image in Beckett's drama. Three small heads protruding from three gigantic urns are characters, prop and setting in this bewildering play, which can be considered a predecessor to all of Beckett's later plays. Although content-wise, this play is a «histoire banale» [Knowlson, 1994: 444] based on an erotic love-triangle of two women and one man, the visual stage image transcends our understanding and makes the play unique and unforgettable. Theatre was «an especially tempting target for Beckett's deconstructions since it is the one literary genre mediated by the body» [Gontarski, 2001: 169], and in his later plays Beckett makes an assault on the character's onstage body, dehumanising and reducing it to mere fragmented parts. Knowlson affirms that from *Play* onwards, «Beckett's became a theatre of body parts and spectres, a theatre striving for transparency rather than solidity, a theatre, finally, trying to undo itself» [1992: xix]. However, this process of 'undoing' leads Beckett to theatrical innovation of form and concurrently to the creation of new ways of signifying. Thus, the pivotal objective of this article is to analyse the de/construction of the theatrical stage image in *Play* through the lens of phenomenology.

In light of the foregoing, this article delves into the process of image reduction taking into consideration early typescripts of the play and the modifications to the stage directions introduced after the premier of *Spiel* in Germany, which were documented by Knowlson's official biography and Beckett's official correspondence. Further on, we analyse the stage tableau in the light of Rudolf Arnheim's theory of perception according to balance,

weight, shape, form, location and colours. The last criterium of analysis – light– is dealt with separately, since the role of the spotlight in this play is not only limited to mere illumination of the stage, but was conceived by Beckett as the fourth character. Though incorporeal, the spotlight is turned into a conductor of *Play*, and amongst his multiple roles is to fragment the already reduced stage tableau.

Less is More: Early Typescripts and First Theatre Productions

The process of writing *Play* can give us some dramatic clues to the deconstruction of the stage tableau. According to Brater, Beckett was especially concerned with the stage image in *Play* [1990: 28], evidenced by the fact that there are about ten typescripts with continuous modifications.[1] Beckett had been fiddling with the idea of «one act, one hour, three faces (mouths) and lights» [Knowlson, 1996: 444] since January-February 1962. The first mention of *Play* appears only on April 26, 1962, in a letter to Barbara Bray:[2] «False start with 3 white boxes, but so false, hardly dare try again» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 476]. Nevertheless, instead of giving up on the play, *Play* started to take shape and occupied Beckett's mind for more than a year, and the premier of the play took place in Ulm, Germany on June 14, 1963.[3] Based on the feedback of the first production, Beckett continued to modify both the text and the stage directions; the changes were introduced to the ensuing productions in New York,[4]

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[1] The initial holograph manuscript has not surfaced. See Knowlson, 1996: 444.

[2] Barbara Bray (producer, translator, critic) was Beckett's friend and lover. Their relation is well-documented both by their correspondence and by Knowlson in *Damned to Fame*. «He [Beckett] came to trust her as well as loving her, and the measure of this trust was that he could and did, over the years, talk and write to her without reservations about his work» See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 201a7: 695.

[3] Deryk Mendel was the director of the Ulm production of *Spiel*.

[4] New York premiere was on January 4, 1964 in the Cherry Lane Theatre, directed by Alan Schneider.

London,[5] and Paris.[6] Hereinafter we pretend to analyse these modifications in the light of image deconstruction.

In *Beckett Canon*, Ruby Cohn summarizes various versions of this play. The first typescript is based on a rather realistic setting: the lovers, Syke and Conk, fight for the affections of red-headed Nickie in Limbo [Cohn, 2001: 281]. The play, deeply rooted in the reality of the British middle-class life of «China cups of green tea in the cool "morning room," the sound of an old mower» [Knowlson, 1996: 444], comically represents the adulterous affair. Characters' proper names bring along with them a particular cultural identity, as we can trace the origins of their names: 'Syke' to Yorkshire county and 'Conk'[7] –to Germany, while 'Nickie' is a typically British name. Initially, all the characters were placed in white boxes, which strongly reminded of funeral coffins. Although immobile, the whole bodies were present onstage. Enoch Brater specifies that in the first three versions of the play there were three different lights directed towards the characters' faces. Once illuminated, the character had a five-seconds pause to respond to the light [1990: 29]. Conceived as a comedy, the characters narrated their sexual adventures in the form of a dialogue, which was repeated in the second part of the play.

By the fourth typescript, substantial changes were introduced to the whole play. Not satisfied with the too realistic white boxes, Beckett replaces them with urns, an object with multiple literary and historic associations. The characters were placed inside the urns, with only their heads showing. The fragmented body *per se* becomes a raw material adjusted to a physical object and chained to a specific location on the stage. In this pseudo-fusion of an urn and a head, Beckett creates a new «compositional entity» [Garner, 1994: 55], which does not obey to the laws of traditional mise-en-scéne; for

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[5] London premiere of *Play*, directed by George Devine, took place in the Old Vic Theatre on April 7, 1964.
[6] The French premiere of *Comédie*, directed by Jean-Marie Serreau, took place on June 11, 1964, in the Pavillon de Marsan, as part of Estival 1964.
[7] 'Conk' also means Afro-American hairstyle.

here, the whole play is being structured around this indeterminable static image. Moreover, the gender of the love triangle was changed to that of two women and a man. And instead of giving them names, Beckett assigns impersonal letters, M, W1 and W2, to the characters, stripping them of their cultural identities. Besides, he drastically changes the text of the play, separating the characters' memories from their recognition of their present situation.

In the sixth script Beckett divides the text into three major parts: Chorus, Narration and Meditation. Eliminating the dialogue, the characters become unaware of the presence of others onstage. Enclosed in his/her own consciousness, they interact only with the light. The latter is transformed into a sort of interrogator, once directed onto the faces, it elicits the speeches from the characters. It seems that Beckett's special concern was with the spotlight, its movements and its intensity. He shares his worries with Barbara Bray in his letter dated 16/8/1962:

> Fear I've overfiddled with the play *Play*, pace te, but found at least apex theme for half light, i.e. are they being heard, are they as much as being seen – "Mere eye, quite unintelligent, opening and closing on me." But still worried about that part. [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 494]

The incorporeal spotlight is being transformed into the fourth character in *Play* and serves not only as an interrogator but also as a device to disclose a metaphysical theme of perception. «Am I as much as … being seen?» [Beckett, 1986: 317], asks M at the end of the play. «Is anyone looking at me? Is anyone bothering about me at all?» [Beckett, 1986: 314], queries W2. Being is conceived as being seen or being illuminated by the spotlight in *Play*. As Beckett was quite familiar with Berkeley's *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, he embodies *esse est percipi* in the spotlight, making it omni-powerful and omnipresent. He explains to Barney Rosset (21/6/63):

> The point of departure is the old metaphysical doctrine to the effect that being consists in being perceived and that without some perceiving intelligence there would be nothing – the counter-doctrine being that objectivity reality is an absolute independent of any such intelligence and existing indestructibly whether apprehended or not. [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 549]

Further modifications were introduced to the play after its premiere in Ulm, directed by Deryk Mendel. Beckett himself was not able to see the performance, hence it was his wife, Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil, who informed him of the production. In addition, he received a detailed report from Unseld Sigfried,[8] the publisher of Suhrkamp Verlag.[9] Although *Spiel* received very favourable criticism, there were still some problems to be tackled: the characters' appearance, the shape of the urns, the tempo of the play, and above all the lighting.

In the stage directions in the final script for the Ulm production, Beckett described the characters' appearance as «age and appearance indifferent» [Knowlson, 1996: 460]. In spite of his indications, in Mendel's performance the characters had distinguishable physical characteristics: «the quasi-intellectual husband with glasses, blinking in the light; the red-haired, older, very monotone wife; and a pale-blond girl with a pouting mouth» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 558]. Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil also commented about the excess of makeup [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 560]. Hence, Beckett changes stage directions to: «[f]aces so lost in age and aspect as to seem almost part of the urns. But masks forbidden» [Beckett, 1986: 307; Knowlson, 1996: 460], and in the letter to Alan Schneider[10] he gives very strict indications about the characters' faces to be «as little differentiated as possible. Three great disks» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 584]. Actually, Beckett's concern was to diminish the

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[8] «Uraufführung SPIEL von Samuel Beckett am Ulmer Theater,» 14 June 1963; GEU, MS 1221.
[9] The report and the correspondence with Unseld Sigfried can be found in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett,* vol. 3. See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017: 557-8.
[10] The director of *Play* production in New York, 1963.

actors' heads[11] so as to give prominence to the urns. The playwright's obsession with the general neutrality and compositional unity of the image (three heads in three urns) leads him to eliminate all possible distinguishing features, creating a unique hybrid of human and inhuman parts. In doing this Beckett decentralizes the audience's gaze, shifting perspective from the actors' bodies towards a new scenic entity. In the Old Vic Theatre production, London, the urn-like appearance was achieved «by applying porridge, egg white, and glue to the actors' faces» [Knowlson, 1996: 460], followed by white makeup. While the actors were performing onstage, parts of the makeup used to fly off. Billie Whitelaw, who played the part of W2, remembers that «[i]t looked as though we were disintegrating in front of the audience.»[12] This startling effect only contributed to the general atmosphere of decay and putrefaction parallel to the speech fragmentation as the utterances become shorter and shorter throughout the play.

The shape of the urns was another problem to be solved. In Deryk Mendel's production the actors were sitting in beautifully shaped large urns onstage. Beckett was dissatisfied both with the 'bulging' shape of the urns, and with the actors' position.[13] He proposes to change the actors' position to standing, thus narrowing the urns, and to place the urns closer to each other [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 584]. Furthermore, his technical advice was to paint the urns' contours in darkened colour in order to reduce their volume [Ibid.], as the idea that he had in mind was «to preserve the shape of the funeral urns rather than of almost circular tubs» [Knowlson, 1996: 460]. Placing the accent on the perception of the urns as repositories of dead bodies mirrors the play's general setting –the afterlife. The characters are no longer alive, trapped inside the urns they are facing their Final Judgment. And although being unaware of the presence of others, the urns proximity, «the full length urns closely fitting as possible» [Ibid.], gives us the clue to

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[11] In the letter to Alan Schneider 26/11/1963, Beckett writes: «Obviously the smaller the actors the better.» See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 584.
[12] The interview with Billie Whitelaw, 4 May 1993. See Knowlson, 1996: 460.
[13] Letter to Alan Schneider, 26/11/1963. See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 584.

understand this image: their togetherness.[14] The connection the characters had in life is not lost, they bring their domestic squabbles and earthly passions to the afterlife. And though M says «We were never together» [Beckett, 1986: 308], the onstage image juxtaposes his words. Due to an unresolved conflict they are drawn even closer in their present predicament.

The main technological problem was posed by the spotlight in Mendel's production. On the one hand Beckett was very specific about the single spot that should not «pierce the darkness of the auditorium» [Knowlson, 1996: 459], thus limiting the boundaries of the characters' world; and on the other hand, the single spot of light should move at a fast speed from actor to actor. Beckett's direction to Schneider with respect to the light was: «There should be a pencil (finger) of light snapping from face to face» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 584]. It was Serreau[15] who solved this problem in *Comédie* production, Paris. He invented a system with a mirror and a switch to focus the spotlight on an actor's face, which was operated from the prompt-box [Knowlson, 1996: 459]. The extra difficulty was that the light operator was expected to know the text to perfection in order to press the switch and redirect the spotlight at the precise moment. In the rehearsals of *Comédie*, there was another modification introduced to the intensity of the spotlight, and that is that in the Meditation part the level of lighting was dimmed together with the lower voices of the characters. The dramatic effect achieved was that of visual extinguishing, mirrored by W1's words: «Dying for dark – and the darker the worse…» [Beckett, 1986: 317]. It seemed that the image was disappearing, melting into darkness, in the process of actual performance.

Finally, Beckett increased the speed of speech delivery to *da capo*, reducing pauses from 5 to 2-3 seconds. Despite Unseld's advice to make the words more intelligible in the play, Beckett was more than certain about *da capo* efficiency and urged to sacrifice anything for the sake of the rhythm:

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[14] In the letter to Warren Brown, 20/7/76, Beckett writes: «The togetherness should never be lost.» See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed., 2017b: 431.
[15] The director of *Comédie*, Paris.

> The fragments of speech should follow on one another so fast, and the light extort them with such urgency, in a kind of feverish discontinuity, as to leave the audience confused, at the end of the first time through, and not to averse to a restatement. [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 574]

In this vein Devine[16] asserts that the words in *Play* did not convey thoughts and were turned into mere «dramatic ammunition» [Knowlson, 1996: 459]. The importance of *da capo* in the image de/construction lies in shifting the audience's focus of attention from some practically unintelligible characters' narrative to the extra-linguistic elements of the play. Thus, the form/stage image becomes the content of the play.

In view of the above, and based on the principle 'less is more,' Beckett manages to create an innovative visual stage tableau by getting rid of elements that are too naturalistic. He uses all the scenic devices at hand, such as light, props, spatial possibilities, and even characters' bodies and rhythm of speech, to create a new aesthetics of theatre. Driving fragmentation to the extreme, Beckett confronts wholeness *per se*. Rejecting the supremacy of body onstage, immobilizing it in a physical object, he treats it as a mere theatrical element. Violated and dehumanised, it becomes part of the stage environment. In the letter to Judith Smith, 25/2/64, the playwright expresses his general feelings about *Play's* creation, placing special focus on its visual artistic composition:

> I don't know what to think of PLAY myself. It seemed to function on my dim mental stage when I did it, enough at least to justify my letting it go. And I felt it had something the others had not, nothing to do with writing (no attempt at writing there) or with more or less compassion or humour, but simply in the way of theatrical contrivance and attitude. [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 593]

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[16] The director of Old Vic production, London.

Analysis of Stage Image in *Play*

Deprived of any mobility, the living stage tableau of three dehumanised heads planted inside three grey urns in *Play* resembles more a sculpture or a three-dimensional painting. Perhaps the origins of this bewildering creation can be found in Beckett's passion for the arts. Knowlson affirms that Beckett was more at home in the company of painters than that of writers:[17] Henri Hayden, Jack Butler Yeats, Avigdor Arikha were among his best friends, not to mention, Thomas MacGreevy, who was an art critic and the director of the National Irish Gallery. Beckett was a frequent visitor to the National Irish Gallery, the British Museum, etc., and so possessed vast knowledge in the field of arts. Avigdor Arikha commented that «he could spend as much as an hour in front of a single painting» [Knowlson, 1996: 186]. In Beckett's later plays for theatre there is a «pull towards two-dimensionality» and «pictorial flatness» [Garner, 1994: 74] as the playwright shifts his interests from a theatre of action towards a theatre of images, transforming the stage into a visual field, where perception starts to play a vital role in the understanding of his plays:

> In their increasingly pictorial use of performance space, the late plays reveal a deepening interest not only in the stage as visual place, but also in the phenomenology of vision, and the living body that underlines them both. [Ibid.: 85]

Several of Beckett's stage tableaus were influenced by paintings: *Not I* (1972), *That Time* (1975), *Footfalls* (1975),[18] *Rockaby* (1985)[19]

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[17] In Beckett official biography, James Knowlson describes Beckett's passion for arts. In 1933, when he was depressed, he used to spend day in the National Irish Gallery. See Knowlson, 1996: 159. In 1936 he makes an artistic pilgrimage to Germany, where he visits not only different museums but also private collections. See Knowlson, 1996: 218-226. His official correspondence also demonstrates his interest in painting.

[18] Knowlson attributes the image of an incessantly walking woman in *Footfalls* to Antonello da Messina's *Virgin of the Anunciation* from the Alte Pinakothek (Munich). See Knowlson, 1996: 238.

[19] Knowlson documents that the creation of stage tableau of *Rockaby* was greatly influenced by such paintings as Whistler's *Study in Gray and Black*, Rembrandt's *Margaretha Trip* (de Geer), Van Gough's *La Berceuse*, and Yates' *Sleep*. See Knowlson, 1996: 583.

[Knowlson, 1996: 583]. Although there are no specific references to paintings in relation to *Play* stated in Beckett's official correspondence or his official biography, this play becomes the predecessor of the scenic tableau created in *Not I* and *That Time*: severed from the body head floating in the stage darkness. This grotesque image was inspired by Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* in the Oratory of St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, when the playwright visited Malta in 1971 [Knowlson, 1996: 520; Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017b: 671]. Therefore, pictorial inspirations were always present in creation of theatrical images in Beckett's theatre. Knowlson attributes this particular quality to Beckett's mental world of images:

> A few of these paintings were to become so much part of his mental world that they resurfaced when he came to create his own visual images for the stage or to realize his plays onstage as his own director. [Knowlson, 1996: 238]

Experimenting with corporeality, location, lighting effects, and mobility, Beckett sculptures the images on the canvas of a stage, thus, destroying the fragile boundary between drama and paintings. His late plays are filled more «with references to eyes and to the shapes» [Ibid.: 54] and are addressed towards the creative eye of his audience, therefore the analysis of the image in *Play* is carried out applying Rudolf Arnheim's theory[20] of art and visual perception, based on Gestalt psychology. Perception *per se* is of primary importance to Arnheim, since «[v]ision is not a mechanical recording of elements but rather the apprehension of significant structural patterns» [1974: 6], ergo, we decode the image through our senses and previous experiences.

The criteria for the analysis chosen are balance, weight, location, shape and form, colour, and light as well as the interplay of directed tensions between the structural elements. We are aware that this analysis

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[20] Beckett studied Arnheim's theory in 1934-6 in relation to cinema, documented by Knowlson. See Knowlson 1996: 212.

can have certain limitations, especially applied to the scenic tableau, inasmuch as the spectators' location in the auditorium will influence their perception; there is a great difference between viewing the stage image from the first row of the stalls than from the left balcony. Therefore, we predetermine the angle of perception for this analysis as central frontstage.

When the curtain is up in *Play* we are exposed to:

Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns about one yard high. From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. The heads are those, from left to right as seen from auditorium, of w2, m and w1. They face undeviatingly front throughout the play. Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of the urns. [...] The curtain raises on stage in almost complete darkness. Urns just discernible. Five seconds. Faint spot simultaneously on three faces. Three seconds. Voices faint largely unintelligible. [Beckett: 1986: 307]

The gradual exposure of the image from the stage darkness reminds of a process of sculpturing and creates a tension in the perception of the stage tableau. At first our eyes must get used to darkness, so when the spotlight is projected onto the three heads simultaneously, it startles the audience due to the grotesqueness of what we see. At the same time, directing the light on the three heads makes us see the image as a unique whole.

Any image has a quest for balance, if we understand 'balance' as «the spatial relation within the whole» [Arnheim, 1974: 11], and the image in *Play* is highly symmetrical: one central urn, which contains the head of a man, and two adjacent urns (the left contains W2 and the right – W1). The left and right urns are so alike, that they can be conceived as mirror-images. When the curtain rises in the theatre, the audience normally looks left first, due to the dominance of left cerebral cortex. Thus, it is W2, the man's lover, we see first. Curiously, if «two equal objects are shown in the left and right halves, the one on the right looks larger» [Ibid., 34], as a consequence, perceptual tension is created between two identical parts: left urn with W2, we first direct our gaze to, and the right one with W1, which is perceived as

girthier. This perceptual tension introduces the main theme of the play: the women's rivalry for a man. While alive, both women desperately tried to seduce the man to leave the other woman. Celebrating her short-lived victory, W1 says: «So he was mine again. All mine. I was happy again» [Beckett, 1986: 311], meanwhile M is trying to convince W2 to escape: «The only solution was to go away. He swore we should as soon as he had put his affairs in order» [Ibid.: 311]. The man becomes the apple of discord, the subject of plight between the two women, and compositionally, the urn that contains the man is the centre of this balanced image. According to Arnheim, a central position conveys stability and perceptual harmony. By the same token, it is the man in *Play* who dreams of peace and harmony: «Perhaps they have become friends. Perhaps– […] sorrow has brought them together» [Ibid.: 313]. In the letter to Cristian Ludvigsen, in relation to M's desires, Beckett explains:

> He has this fantasy of how they might all three have lived together, slept and woke together, gone rowing together on the river on a May morning. Because they never did –"we were not civilized". [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 574]

This desired harmony is absolutely unachievable and becomes an illusion juxtaposed by the women's vehement speeches. Albeit the central position conveys stability, «it also constitutes an absence, collapsing movement and direction into stillness and fixity» [Garner, 1994: 76-7]. Due to M's total lack of action mirrored by the text of *Play*: he is neither able to leave his wife nor to walk down on his lover; the centre in the play represents inertia and compositional equilibrium. Though static, the centre of the image always attracts invisible focus of power and is considered «the principle *locus* of attraction» [Arnheim, 1974: 13], as we group the objects in relation to the central image. The centre becomes our visual reference and, compositionally, the force that holds the image together. Likewise, the central urn with M's head becomes the axis of both the onstage image and the text, meanwhile the urns containing the women's heads are the two

forces that pull the image in opposite directions, thusly creating perceptual tension on the stage tableau.

As far as the weight of this image is concerned, location, depth, size and experience should be discussed. By 'weight' Arnheim understands «the strength that pulls the objects downwards» [1974: 23]. The location of the urns is central, front and linear. Thus, closer to the auditorium the image is perceived bigger in size and girthier. The volume of empty space/darkness, which envelops the urns, influences our perception of weight, as «the greater the depth an area of visual field reaches, the greater the weight it carries» [Ibid.: 24]. Notwithstanding, the big volume of thick stage darkness possesses pictorial flatness in *Play*, and is counterbalanced by the three-dimensional image, illuminated by the spotlight and located frontstage. The urns, located on plinths, are bottom-heavy and this influences our perception of a possible downward movement, as though the characters were being sucked into the urns due to gravity. The latter is confirmed by the urn-like appearances of the faces, as well as by M's words: «Down, all going down, into the dark, peace is coming…» [Beckett, 1986: 312]. This downward movement or 'falling effect' gets stronger in the Meditation part. In the letter to Devine, Beckett described it as «the impression of falling with suggestion of conceivable dark and silence in the end, or of an indefinite approximating towards it» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 597]. Billie Whitelaw remembers her nerve-racking experience of acting in *Play*,[21] and also highlights the sensation of falling:

> The very first time I did it, I went to pieces. I felt I had no body; I could not relate to where I was; and, going at that speed, I was becoming very dizzy and felt like an astronaut tumbling into space…I swore to God I was falling. [Knowlson ed., 1996: xviii]

Furthermore, our perception of weight is biased by our experience with an object in real life. As urns are normally made of clay, stone or

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[21] Old Vic theatre production, London.

metal, we appraise the image as heavy and stable. However, there is a certain equilibrium in perception created between the two parts of the image: heads and urns. Though smaller in size, the heads awake our intrinsic interest not only because in the theatre a body is the theatrical agent but also due to their grotesqueness: «The tiniest object may exert fascination that compensates the weight» [Arnheim, 1974: 24]. Therefore, the weight between the heads and the urns is compensated achieving balance and symmetry of the image.

Another aspect to analyse in the perception of a theatrical image is shape, which is determined not only by the boundaries of an object, but also by our memories of this particular object. Seeing means grasping some outstanding features of an object, which «not only determine its identity but also make it appear as a complete, integrated pattern» [Ibid.: 44]. The image that we face has extraordinary qualities as it incorporates human and inhuman parts with no discernible line between both: «the geometry of figure forms [is] part of a larger geometry of field, contributing to a performance image that is at once sculptural and pictorial» [Garner, 1994: 64]. The outer boundaries of this tableau are shaped by the stage darkness which solidifies the onstage image. As there are no sharp angles, the shape is perceived as a compositional unity of two simple geometrical forms which overlap: an oval and a circle. According to Arnheim, when an overlapping occurs between two simple shapes, they tend to be seen as one [1974: 121]. Although, in *Play's* image the overlapping is two-fold: between a head and an urn, and between the three urns; the heads remain separate objects. This structural composition of stage tableau embodies the main theme of the play: even though the characters are not aware of the others' presence, their unity is the engine of the play. The characters share the same fate which is mirrored by their mutual 'Yes', which is the opening word in the play:

> Yes, the trio is in semidarkness together; yes, they are provoked into speech by a spotlight on their faces; yes, they are virtually indistinguishable from one another; yes, their urns touch, but the cannot. Yet the immediate divergence of their words ironizes the affirmation of their opening "Yes." [Cohn, 2001: 282]

The fusion of heads and urns leads the discussion into the field of form. The spatial image is three-dimensional and oriented towards the audience. The linear distribution of the urns is juxtaposed by their quantity, three, creating an invisible triangle, which becomes the form of the play. The initial triangle pattern is also present in the narrative structure of *Play:* «not only there are three voices issuing from the three urns, but each voice in its monologue makes nine basic statements or the figure of three – making the total statement three cubed» [Pountney, 1998: 30]. Content wise, all three characters are trapped in the eternal triangle in the afterlife. Love triangles can be traced back to mythology all over the world. It is in Dante's Inferno[22] that the sin of 'love triangle' is confronted. In the second circle [Dante, Canto V], we find the couples 'damned by love' because of the lustful sins of the flesh, such as adultery. At the entrance they confess their sins to Minos. *Play* incorporates not only the theme of confession[23] but also Dantesque[24] imagery.

The Purgatory theme is embedded in the structural composition of the image. The urn as such has a very similar symbolism in various cultures: death, funerals, and the after-death world. In Greece, an 'urn' is a symbol of mourning, as after cremation the ashes of the dead were put into the urn for burial. There is a wink towards ancient Greek drama in *Play* as it is framed with a chorus. In Egypt, in turn, an 'urn' represents immortality, the ancient Egyptians believed that life would be restored through the vital organs

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[22] Ruby Cohn writes about Beckett's fascination with Dante and asserts that «Dante was to remain Beckett's most durable literary allegiance.» See Cohn, 2001: 4.

[23] The word 'confess' is used by all the characters: W1: «I confess my first feeling was one of wonderment»; W2: «I confess that did alarm me a little, at the time,» and W1 talking about M also says: «.. he slunk in, fell on his knees before me, buried his face in my lap and … confessed.» See Beckett, 1986: 309.

[24] Dantesque legacy is present in *Play* not only in the form of bizarre images in afterlife, but also *Divine Comedy* and *Play* share the same form of *terza rima*. See Pountney, 1998: 31.

stored in the urn. Therefore, the combination of death and immortality is present in the play. No longer alive, the characters are trapped in their private Purgatory, paying a very high price for their immortality. The form of the urns has orientation from expansion to contraction, hence the heads are rooted in the narrow rims of the objects, with no possibility of escape. Practically motionless, they can be conceived as fragmented-by-time Greek statues.

The origins of bodies fused with the material objects can be traced to Beckett's earlier drama: in *Endgame* (1956), Beckett places legless characters, Nag and Nell, inside the dustbins onstage, anchoring them in a physical object and reducing their mobility. However, the characters still possess their living bodies and can communicate and touch each other. In *Happy Days* (1961)*,* this fusion is getting stronger, Winnie is buried up to her waist in the mound in the first act, gradually sinking into the earth: in the second act only her neck and head are visible to the audience. In *Play* the heads already become part of the urns, the opposition between living part and non-living object creates a perceptual tension and embodies the theme of Cartesian dualism. With the rest of the bodies gone, the urns serve as a substitution for human bodies, since in Cartesian philosophy, the body is viewed as an 'extension' or 'space'; while the talking heads are turned into a pure thinking/talking substance. Further widening the gap between body and mind, Beckett creates a collapsing movement towards total stillness, as, in the end, the urns would mercilessly devour what is left of the bodies.

As for colour, there are no specific indications in the stage directions, however, in the Paris, New York and London productions the predominant colour palette was monochromatic: white-grey scale counterpoised by black/ onstage darkness. The play, initially conceived as «play of dark and light» [Knowlson, 1994: 444], perhaps originates from Aristotelian prejudice against colours: «since all colours were darker than light, they could not be contained in it» [Arnheim, 1974: 338]. Grey, in turn,

can be easily assimilated in both light and darkness, creating a gradual transition from one state to another: from life to death. Devoid of bright colours the image looks lifeless and integrates into the main theme of death and decay in this play. Jane Alison Hale writes that «colour belongs to the past, and the dying universe of his [Beckett's] dying character turns to a uniform grey before we lose sight of it» [Garner, 1994: 70].

As we are dealing with the theatre genre, the analysis of the stage tableau cannot be complete without examining the changes that the image undergoes in the run of the performance. Lifeless and static image is transformed into a living entity by the spotlight, which will be analysed further.

Spotlight as an Agent of Power

«And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehend it not» are the opening words of St. John's gospel, and the beginning of Beckett's *Play*. When the spotlight probes the darkness of the theatre, it brings the static stage tableau to life: the three heads start talking incessantly. Beckett always had a special interest in light and darkness contrast, as he creates a parallel effect between the two opposite elements, while «light carves illuminated space from the surrounding darkness, […] it approaches the status of visual objects in its own» ; darkness, hence, becomes «a conventional non-space in theatrical performance – a region of absence that borders illumination» [Garner, 1994: 66]. In Beckett's theatre the interplay of light/darkness does not serve as a mere technical device but, on a metaphysical level, it creates other dimensions onstage. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, for instance, the playwright creates the zones of light and darkness onstage, which not only embody Manichean thinking, but Krapp's cubby-hole becomes the dominium of death.[25] In this vein Keller discusses

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[25] Beckett associates the backstage where Krapp goes for a drink with the dominium of death. He explained to Martin Held at rehearsal in Berlin: « 'Old Nick's there. Death is

the pivotal functions of light as the source of illumination and as a creator of dimensions in theatre performance:

> […] in everyday contexts, light serves to make existing things visible. On stage, however, it creates a new reality. 'Created' light helps us to thrust forward into spaces that establish and nurture their own reality, helps us to thrust forward into dimensions that are different from the ones we experience everyday. [1999: 10]

Following traditional theatre conventions, light was conceived both as a device to ensure sufficient visibility and illumination of a character in a performance, as well as a tool to unfold other realities present onstage. By the same token Fabrizio Crisafully, who was a light designer, succinctly defines the role of light in the theatre as «to shape time and space, to become a dramatic structure, and serve as a means of unfolding or producing "actions"» [2008: 93]. Thusly, he distinguishes three modes of light: 1) a source of illumination; 2) visual object; 3) a technical device [Ibid.: 129]. Furthermore, both Appia and Craig agree on light being an active agent of theatre which encompasses immense creation potential [Garner, 1994:65]. The latter seems to lay the foundations on which Beckett conceived the role of the spotlight in *Play*. Shifting the supremacy from the actor's body onstage to the spotlight, he transgresses the boundaries of theatre possibilities and makes this ephemeral scenic component a material beyond the technical background –an active participant of this play and an agent of power. In the same vein Arnheim highlights divine powers of light:

> Light is more than just a physical cause of what we see. Even psychologically it remains one of the most fundamental and powerful of human experiences, an apparition understandably worshipped, celebrated, and importuned in religious ceremonies. [1974: 303]

Multiple are the functions of the spotlight in *Play*, by and large, the omnipresent and omnipotent light becomes the fourth 'player' in this

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standing beside [behind] him and unconsciously he's looking for it.» See Knowlson, 1992: xvi.

performance apart from being a technical element. The characters attribute human-like qualities to the spotlight,[26] as reason and compassion, W1 begs to the spotlight: «Mercy, mercy, tongue still hanging out for mercy» [Beckett, 1986: 312]. Both women try to persuade it to leave them in peace: «You will get weary of me» [Ibid.], says W1, «Give me up, as bad job. Get away and start poking and pecking at someone else» [Ibid.], pleads W2. However, it is the man who pinpoints the essence of light from an ontological perspective: «And now, that you are … a mere eye. Just looking. At my face on and off» [Ibid.: 317]. Therefore, the spotlight can be conceived as the eye of a spectator, a mere witness, whose only goal is to make the characters play their parts. It is M, who explains us the unusual title of this play: «I know now, all that was just … play» [Ibid.: 313], which leads the audience to ponder on the characters' existence as a mere joke.

Be it as it may, enabled with unique power the spotlight becomes the conductor of *Play.* Not only does it direct our gaze to a certain stage element, but it also has control over the characters' speeches (their speed and the length of their utterances), and over our perception of the onstage image. Since the pivotal goal of this research is to underpin the process of image deconstruction, we will focus on the spotlight's power to fragment the stage tableau and generate new meanings in the play. To do so, several characteristics of light are analysed in relation with the stage image: colour, shape and speed, proprioception, angle, and intensity throughout the performance.

Possessing the properties of mutability and transience, the light brings dynamism and plasticity to the static stage tableau. On the one hand, it weaves the image into a coherent visual, spatial and temporal scheme but,

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[26] In the letter to Christian Ludvigsen, 22/9/63, Beckett writes: «The light may be thought of as an inquisitorial intelligence. Throughout the second part the three characters speculating on its nature and exigencies, address it directly What does it want of them? Why does it go down? Why does it go out? Is it not mere mindless eye?» See Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 573.

on the other hand, the continuous change of the spotlight perspective brings instability to the already symmetrical and balanced stage image.

Though it is easy to perceive the contrast of light and darkness, when it comes to describing colour of light, we can only tackle its brightness due to its properties of transparency and immateriality. Brightness *per se* relies on «distribution of light in total situation, on the optical and physiological processes in the observer's eyes and nervous system, and on objects physical capacity to absorb or reflect light» [Arnheim, 1974: 305]. Therefore, brightness depends on the interaction of the spotlight with the objects onstage, and the properties of the latter which make them absorb or reflect light. Arnheim argues that the blacker the object the more light it absorbs [Ibid.: 306], thusly it is perceived as less bright. Being grey, the urns reflect the light, and are perceived as bright; the effect is that of luminance being reinforced by the stage darkness. However, as there is one shaft of light, light is not distributed equally in the stage environment. Being smaller in size, the shaft of light interacts with the stage darkness, which penetrates the spotlight diluting it into a greyish colour. W1 describes it as «[h]ellish half-light» [Beckett, 1986: 312, 316], pinpointing the spotlight's dual nature. Garner asserts that «[h]alf-light shares both light and darkness, and this conflicting loyalty gives Beckett's stage perceptual disequilibrium, with space and the elements that inhabit it striving […] toward opposing states of visual rest» [1994: 69].

The shape of the spotlight was of primary importance to Beckett as it generated meaning in the play. As mentioned above, the light is not dispersed in the stage space, though immaterial it possesses a distinctive body: a shaft. Having only sufficient force to pierce the darkness, its maximum surface of illumination is reduced to the three heads together, which «should be as a single spot branching into three» [Beckett, 1986: 318].

The arrow-like form of the spotlight embodies the main theme of interrogation in *Play*: «[t]he light should have a probing quality, like an

accusing finger levelled at them one after another» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 574], writes Beckett to Ludvigsen, on September 22, 1963. By the same token, Devine compared it to the inquisition or a «dental drill» [Knowlson, et. al., 1980: 113]. The shape of light is closely interrelated with its brisk speed in *Play* as for Beckett it was not enough to illuminate the faces, «they must be "fusillés" by a visible swivelling beam» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 574]. Both shape and speed are tools of interrogation and torture. The shifting of the spotlight does not have any predictable pattern, it chooses its victim at random, compelling him/her to 'confess', and does not stay long on one face. Fast speed of the spotlight relocation, which is accelerated in the second act, fractures the characters' speeches, interrupting them in the middle of a sentence, and influences the fragmentation of the stage tableau.

As one of the light properties is proprioception, the spotlight generates multiple interrelations and instabilities by the continuous change of perspective in the run of the performance. Relocating the perspective of our vision from one head to another, it makes the stage tableau lose its axis. The image stability is achieved only when the whole stage tableau is illuminated, which occurs four times during the play: in the beginning, at the end of act 1, at the beginning of act 2 and at the end of act 2. In doing so, Beckett visually structures the play's content. By illuminating the three urns at once at the beginning of the play, the light expands our vision and presents us with the whole stage tableau, only to deform it later by directing its luminous gaze towards W1's head and coercing her to speak. Once the spotlight is projected onto one head, the others are submerged into darkness, consequently, the image is reduced to one component. Rosemary Pountney describes the process of de/construction of the image in *Play* in the light of Cubism. She parallels the fragmentation of the stage image by light to the echo and counterpoints of characters' speeches, which can be conceived as pieces of a puzzle which a spectator should put together in order to see the broader picture. «Beckett achieves a dual Cubist effect in *Play*: the initial

picture is built up fragmentarily and the audience forms a concept as to its meaning» [Pountney, 1998: 29].

Along the same lines, the spotlight manipulates the audience's perception: illuminating W1 in the right urn at the very beginning may serve as an example. Due to the dominium of our left cortex, we always start to decode by looking left first, but as the light illuminates the right urn, disorientated, we are forced to redirect our gaze. Likewise, the audience becomes the subject of the tyranny of light.

The position/angle of the spotlight in *Play* is another factor to examine. Beckett indicated that «the ideal position for spot is at centre of footlights» [Fehnsenfeld, Overback, ed. 2017a: 574], making it part of the characters' world. The impact of the illumination from below is manifold. Lit from below, the height of the image increases and the side boundaries between the three urns are blurred. Nevertheless, there occurs a perceptual disequilibrium between the top of the image and its bottom. The sagittal horizontal axis is displaced to the upper part and the image is divided into separate visual sections. Therefore, the angle of the spotlight challenges compositional unity of the stage tableau. On the other hand, footlights disfigure the characters' faces. A steep angle of the spotlight makes the faces look older and accentuates their facial cavities, mouths and eyes. With the interplay of light and darkness, the sockets of the eyes are enlarged giving the characters a ghost-like appearance, and while they speak their mouths are deformed. This process of disfiguration is mirrored in the text by the characters' concern with their appearance. «Is it something I should do with my face, other than utter?» [Beckett, 1986: 314], asks W1. «Pudding face, puffy, spots, blubber mouth […]» [Ibid.: 310] is how W1 remembers W2.

As one of the light properties is mutability, the intensity of stage light varies throughout the play. Four 'states' of light can be pinpointed: stage semidarkness in the initial stage tableau, more intense spotlight in the first act, dimming light effect in the run of the second act, and nine

blackouts, which create a subtle choreography of light, darkness and shadows. The widely used trope of nine blackouts structures the play into parts, notwithstanding the fact that the number nine is interrelated with the theme of a triangle in the play. Eight blackouts occur at the beginning and end of the play in order to stage the chorus, shifting our perspective from one head to the whole image, and there is one blackout to divide Narration and Meditation parts. Apart from structuring the play, the use of blackouts in the play gives both the characters and the audience a brief time of rest and silence in order to reset their minds in preparation for the next part.

The lower intensity of the spotlight in Meditation together with its faster speed of relocation, «cuts more rapidly from face to face and the impression is of a more frenzied pace» [Knowlson et al., 1980: 117], creates an optical illusion of a flickering image. While the spotlight continues mutilating the stage image, we can retain the afterimages of other heads in our vision, thus maintaining the wholeness of the stage tableau in our minds. Hence, lower intensity of light together with shorter fragments of speech creates the sensation of extinguishing and ghostliness in the performance. In light of the foregoing Cohn affirms that «[t]he lower voices and dimmer light in the Meditation enhance the eerie quality of the triangle, which is fictionally eternal» [Cohn, 2001: 282]. Nevertheless, we are there to witness total dissolution of the stage tableau, after the last words uttered by M: «We were not longer together–» [Beckett, 1986: 318].

Conclusions

This article set out to address the major question of the stage tableau deconstruction and generation of meaning in Beckett's *Play*. Namely, we were interested in the fragmentation techniques not only during the play performance, but also during the creative process of writing the play. Having analysed the early typescripts together with stage modifications after the premier in Ulm, we have arrived at the following conclusions. Although it started as a naturalistic play with well-defined characters and a simple

setting of the three white boxes illuminated by separate spotlights, in the process of writing Beckett not only eliminated all cultural markers and distinguishable features of the characters, but drastically changes the initial stage image. By fragmenting bodies, eliminating any possible facial expressions, using urn-like makeup and fusing them with the material objects onstage, Beckett manages to create a new compositional entity, which embodies the main themes of the play: love-triangle, afterlife, immortality, and decay. With further fragmentation of speech and *da capo* speed, Beckett shifts our attention to *Play's* extra-linguistic features: the stage image, which becomes both the form and the content of *Play.*

Compositionally, the stage image can be conceived as a masterpiece. Well-balanced, highly symmetrical with the interplay of perceptual tensions –which introduce dynamism and depth to the stage tableau– it creates a new approach to stage aesthetics. Conceived as a compositional whole of three elements, the central urn with M's head is both the narrative and structural axis. Notwithstanding the image balance and solidity, it is the spotlight which becomes the agent of power and deconstruction of the living tableau further in the performance. Shifting perspectives, abating spotlight intensity, illuminating from beneath, increasing the speed of relocation of the spotlight together with its shaft-like form, mutilate the stage image. The audience is cognitively challenged to decode the meaning putting the fragments of image and speech together. Paradoxically, in doing so the stage tableau is brought to life and generates multiple meanings, thus both the processes of fragmentation and construction coexist in *Play*.

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