

From Beckett to the Engineered Sound: *Words and Music, Cascando*, and Other Plays for Radio

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In his *Theatre Semiotics*, Fernando de Toro gives a textbook definition to “theatre spatialization/temporalization” (20), that it is a result of “the participants in the dialogue [. . .] refer[ring] to time and space in their dialogue” (20). He adds that, if necessary, “the actual discourse may create this space and time” (20). We can expand on that theory and look at plays which have *not* been written for a performance on stage. A rather extreme example is *Words and Music*, one of Samuel Beckett’s plays for radio. I here focus on a very small section from the opening sequence in the play, when the character Words alerts its fellow character Music to the arrival of their master, Croak, who, for some reason, addresses Words as “Joe” (*Words and Music* 333):

WORDS. [. . .] (*Pause.*) Listen! (*Distant sound of rapidly shuffling carpet slippers.*) At last! (*Shuffling louder. Burst of tuning.*) Hsst! (*Tuning dies away. Shuffling louder. Silence.*)

CROAK. Joe. (333)

Being designated a character in the play, Music is actually a “small orchestra” (*Words and Music* 333). On a superficial level, the “spatializ[ing]/temporaliz[ing]” function of the word “listen” seems quite clear. Words tells Music to “listen,” which implies that the two characters are within the reach of the sound waves originating from the yet-to-be-identified thing/person; this, on the other hand, indicates that neither Words nor Music can actually see the source of the sound. The problem, of course, is that an interpretation of this kind would not be possible if we did not include the *directions* (the term I will use instead of *stage directions*) in our definitions of “dialogue” and “discourse.” With Words uttering words and Music producing instrumental sounds, the “dialogue” in this particular section of the sequence is a conspicuous deviation from what we usually

understand a dialogue to be, a verbal exchange between a person and another person. The character Music can be a “participant” in the “dialogue” only by way of the directions.¹ In short, Beckett flouts the very prerequisite for an author writing for the medium of radio, which David Pownall sums up: “No radio playwright spends time explaining the obvious to the audience—what they should already know” (67). Nothing in *Words and Music* is “obvious” in the first place; as readers of the play-text, we have no choice but to comb through every single line and direction with utmost care, hoping that we will get to “know” as much as possible.

We are reminded of the fact that many critics see “musicality” (Laws 266) in Beckett’s dramatic and non-dramatic pieces; as Catherine Laws puts it, Beckett’s “musicality” is innately textual, which means that it is destined to be highly performative: “[T]he general perception of Beckett’s texts as musical relates closely to the question of meaning in his work and his preference for exploring *how*, rather than *why*, something should be said or done” (267; original emphases). The directions and their “spatializ[ing]/temporaliz[ing]” capabilities are absolutely crucial in a play like *Words and Music*. Alternating with Words’ lines, the directions in the above-quoted section let us know the changing proximity as well as the kind, quality, and tempo of the source of the sound. W. B. Worthen points out that the directions in many of Beckett’s plays “speak directly to a specific set of auditors” (161), or, more to the point, “the actors, directors, and designers who will put the play into practice” (161). According to Worthen, a seemingly contradictory dichotomy of the “theatrically oriented” (161) and a “retreat from theatricality” (161) is the *raison d’être* of Beckett’s directions:

While the narrative directions exemplify the modernist playwright’s retreat from theatricality, Beckett’s plays reanimate that obsolete nineteenth-century tradition, the use of theatrically oriented stage directions that [Bernard] Shaw rejected precisely to incorporate playwriting as readerly literature. Beckett’s plays, in this sense, may address readers and audiences as a secondary effect. (161)

Indeed, there is little difficulty for anyone to conduct a radiophonic reading of the above-quoted section from *Words and Music*, that is, to analyse the directions as if they have been prepared for the sound engineer and/or the director on a production team. The engineer’s primary task, we would assume, is to let the listener of the radio programme *feel* what is already specified in the directions, for example, the “distant”-ness of the sound of the slippers when Words says,

“Listen!”—the very word “listen” becomes a cue intended for the sound engineer. We might even go so far as to say that Words’ lines should make the job of the sound engineer somewhat easier. For example, Words’ “Hsst!” puts a stop to Music’s “burst of tuning,” the latter’s own reaction to the approaching sound of the slippers—it is almost as if Words takes it upon itself to prevent one kind of sound, the tuning, from overwhelming/obliterating the other, the sound of the slippers.

What if we read another of Beckett’s plays for radio, *Cascando*, on the assumption that the directions in it “speak directly” to the sound engineer on a production team? The play has a character called Music, who, like its equivalent in *Words and Music*, expresses everything by strictly non-verbal means; there also is a character called Voice, who we immediately associate with Words in the other play. Despite all that, *Cascando* turns out to be a vastly different play from *Words and Music*, especially when we compare the styles of the directions in the two plays. Here is a tiny section from *Cascando*:

VOICE. [. . .] . . . left the hills . . . he has the choice . . . he has only—
 OPENER. (*with Voice*) And I close.
 (*Silence.*)
 I open the other.
 MUSIC.
 OPENER. (*with Music*) And I close.
 (*Silence.*)
 I open both. (344)

Throughout the play, none of the directions is informative enough for the sound engineer to plan and execute a tangible “spatialization/temporalization.” In his book *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, Eric Prieto discusses the lack of a “concrete environing milieu” (59) in *Cascando*:

In *Words and Music*, the combination of music and text orchestrated by the central figure (named Croak) succeeds in bringing forth the desired image, but a parallel alliance of music and speech is inconclusive in *Cascando*. [. . .] One thing is clear: the fact of *having* a concrete environing milieu greatly increases the chances of success. [. . .] What Beckett gradually came to realize in *The Unnamable*, and put to the test in texts like *Cascando* and *Company*, is that the “Beckettian reduction[.]” the elimination of allegedly extraneous detail, was part of the problem—not the solution. (59; original emphasis)

If the word “image” in this particular context may be described as whatever we

think of in terms of three-dimensionality, rather than two, it follows that *Cascando* seems to allow very little leeway to the sound engineer. We might nevertheless assert that the “problem,” as Prieto calls it above, can be a great fascination as well as a challenge for the sound engineer, to which I will come back later in the essay.

Yet another of Beckett’s plays for radio, *Embers*, is clearly a different kettle of fish: the play’s narrative-line revolves around the “sea” (*Embers* 197). The directions “*Sea scarcely audible*” (197), “*Sea a little louder*” (197), and “*Sea, still faint, audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated*” (197) specify the ways in which the sea is supposed to sound in the play. That the directions establish a highly tangible three-dimensionality makes *Embers* a far cry from *Words and Music* and even further a cry from *Cascando*. Just as importantly, we may deduce from some of the directions in *Embers*, for example, “*Henry’s boots on shingle*” (197) and “*He halts*” (197), that at least one of the characters in the play, Henry, is on the beach and therefore is part of the three-dimensionality. Even the character Ada, who *appears* to Henry with the aid of the direction “*low remote voice throughout*” (201), that is, as a “voice” rather than as a character inhabiting a body, cannot be put alongside such voices as Words in *Words and Music* and Voice in *Cascando*—the fundamental difference lies in that Ada converses verbally with Henry. The task of the sound engineer would be to make the listener of the programme *feel* that Ada is “remote” and yet at the same time *close* enough to be able to talk to Henry in a “low” voice.²

In what follows, a recording of a Beckett play for radio will somewhat crudely be regarded as an “output” (Zielinski 274): the directions as well as the characters’ lines on the page have been interpreted and manipulated by those who, to borrow from Worthen again, “put the play into practice.” I will analyse and discuss some of the manners in which Beckett’s play-texts for radio have been “spatializ[ed]/temporaliz[ed]” by the practitioners. A couple of “outputs,” a recording of *Words and Music* and that of *Cascando*, will be looked at in some detail. A second recording of *Cascando* shall be mentioned, albeit very briefly, for comparative purposes. I will then put the question of “spatialization/temporalization” in a slightly different perspective by bringing into discussion Beckett’s first play for radio, *All That Fall*, which, according to critics, is more radiophonic than its seemingly solid narrative-line may lead us to believe. Daniel Albright, among others, writes that “[t]he not-thereness of the entities specified on radio broadcasts is Beckett’s preoccupation in *All [T]hat Fall*” (107). Throughout the discussion, I will not attempt to separate either the concept or the practice of

“spatialization” from its counterpart of “temporalization.” We might emphasise one over the other, but we cannot talk about one without at least hinting at the other. Marjorie Perloff, for example, discusses *Embers* by first pointing out that a play for radio is temporally “linear” (249), which she then questions by delving into the “disembodi[ed]” (249) nature of a radiophonic and/or “recorded” (249) voice:

[. . .] because radio is essentially an information medium with what appears to be a linear structure, the listener feels compelled to pay close attention with the expectation of “finding out” something. But what does Beckett’s radio audience find out? [. . .] If radio (or the phonograph) has the capacity to bring *voice* into someone else’s public or private space, the disembodiment of that voice, Beckett was quite aware, is a sign that its owner is, whether literally or figuratively, “dead.” Radio, to put it another way, does not allow us to distinguish the living from the dead; their recorded voices, after all, occupy the same soundscape. (249; original emphasis)

It is precisely because “recorded voices” are neither “dead” nor alive that they can *spatially* be “there,” after Albright, or “not there.”

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While a recording of a Beckett play for radio is fundamentally the “input” (Zielinski 274), for example, the voice of an actor playing the role of Words, having been “re-formed” (274) to be presented as an “output,” it is also clear from what we have seen so far that any element of the “output” should always be justified or argued against the play-text written by Beckett. What in the following passage Siegfried Zielinski calls “marked differences between the qualities operating on the input and the qualities of experience operating on the output” must, in the case of a Beckett play for radio, be traced all the way back to his play-text, especially to the parts of the play-text which read like instructions to the practitioners—only then can we start discussing the actual “efficacious work on the interface,” as Zielinski puts it in the passage, in each recording:

The temporal behavior of technical processes may be described as follows: even the qualities that affect such processes from the outset, such as monitoring, checking, and control, are time-dependent. They are re-formed by the technical process. On the output side of any machine-

machine or human-machine system, we find time-dependent qualities of experience. These may also be called dynamic processes. The least that artists and engineers who engage with such processes can do is to ensure that the re-formation, which takes place in the course of the process, sets marked differences between the qualities operating on the input and the qualities of experience operating on the output. This would indeed be efficacious work on the interface; that is, its dramatization. Designed or formed time must give back to people something of the time that life has stolen from them. (274)

I will look at the original BBC productions of *Words and Music* and *Cascando*. The recordings have been digitised by the British Library and available in CD format. Another recording of *Cascando*, a production of the University of London Audio-Visual Centre, is in audiocassette format and available for listening at the British Library.

The directions in the play-text of *Words and Music* and those in the play-text of *Cascando* certainly leave their mark on the two BBC recordings. For the first example, I come back to the section in *Words and Music* where Words alerts Music to the arrival of Croak. In the BBC production of the play (hereafter *BBC WM*), the voice of Patrick Magee playing the role of Words has been engineered in such a way that we the listeners feel very near the character; on the other hand, the orchestral sound of Music has been engineered to make us feel that the whole orchestra is slightly distant. The importance lies not so much in the acoustic configuration of the characters Words and Music per se as in the fact that the configuration nicely explains Words' "Listen!" being followed by the direction "*Distant sound of rapidly shuffling carpet slippers,*" that it complements our "image," to use Prieto's term, of the two characters and a potential third forming an illusorily spatial triangle. About halfway through the play, Croak comes up with the theme "[a]ge" (*Words and Music* 336) for his two subordinates to improvise on:

CROAK. Together. (*Pause. Thump [of the club that Croak is holding].*)

Together! (*Pause. Violent thump.*) Together, dogs!

MUSIC. *Long la.*

WORDS. (*imploring*) No!

(*Violent thump.*)

CROAK. Dogs!

MUSIC. *La.*

WORDS. (*trying to sing*) Age is when . . . to a man . . .

MUSIC. *Improvement of above.*

WORDS. (*trying to sing this*) Age is when to a man . . .

MUSIC. *Suggestion for following.* (*Words and Music* 336)

The character Music in this particular section of *BBC WM* is reduced from the orchestra to a selection of instruments: for the direction “*Long la*,” we hear a cello, some brass instruments, and the organ; for the rest of the directions, the cello performs solo. As in the first example, the sounds of the musical instruments have been engineered so that they feel slightly distant from us the listeners; Words’ voice, as before, feels near us. At the same time, Music contrasts with the “thumps” of Croak’s club: *BBC WM* creates roomy acoustics for the sound of the cello, or that of the brass when applicable, while making certain that the series of thumps reaches the listener’s ear with little resonance, in short, as a succession of noises rather than of sounds. These engineering manipulations again help the listener grasp the “image” of the Words-Music-Croak triangle, or, in this particular case, a triad of Words’ voice, the performing instruments, and Croak with his “thumps.”

Interestingly, the character Music in the BBC production of *Cascando* (hereafter *BBC C*) is a chamber orchestra, too; it must be remembered that the play-text of *Cascando* does not indicate in any manner the actual components of Music. Listening to *BBC C*, we note that the engineering of the voice of the actor playing Voice, who happens to be Patrick Magee again, is quite similar to the manner in which Words in *BBC WM* has been engineered—Voice’s voice feels very near us. The listener can also tell that Music in *BBC C* and Music in *BBC WM* have undergone similar manipulations in terms of engineering: the sound of the orchestra in *BBC C* feels slightly distant from us, and indeed more than slightly so when Voice utters his lines and Music performs its fragments at the same time, which happens on more than one occasion during the play. Can we find a key difference, then, between the engineering of Opener’s voice in *BBC C* and that of Croak’s voice in *BBC WM*? Croak enters the scene at the beginning of the play and makes his exit at the end, which means that he is a highly *movable* character; Croak’s voice in *BBC WM* nevertheless remains fairly stable throughout, which seems to explain the “image” of the characters’ triangle being illusorily spatial rather than naturalistically spatial. As for Opener in *BBC C*, the voice of the actor playing the character is highly stable, by which I mean the listener constantly feels very near the voice. We can easily attribute that to the play-text of *Cascando* not being “image”-orientated—Opener is not the kind of character who appears and disappears. In short, Croak in *BBC WM* and Opener

in *BBC C*, despite being contrastive in terms of their existential conditions, are not hugely different from each other as long as we keep focusing on the aspect of the engineering that manipulates the extent to which we feel near the source of the sound in question.

There is, however, one crucial “spatializ[ing]/temporaliz[ing]” element in *BBC C* that distinguishes the whole production from *BBC WM*. We come back to the above-quoted section from the play-text of *Cascando* and use it as an example. The directions “*with Voice*” and “*with Music*” in that particular section mean, respectively, Opener uttering its line, “And I close,” to coincide with the last few of Voice’s words and Opener repeating the line which overlaps, on this second occasion, with part of the musical fragment performed by Music. Overlapping of that kind is indicated a number of times in the play-text of *Cascando*, whose importance becomes evident when we listen to *BBC C*: the engineering for the production does not attempt to hide the fact that the *recorded* Voice, on the one hand, and the *recorded* Music, on the other, have been *mixed* with the *recorded* Opener. In short, it is precisely when the voices and the musical sounds overlap with each other that the listener is made strongly aware of their having been recorded and then mixed. That, we might assert, proves clearly and effectively how un-“image”-orientated the play *Cascando* is. Moreover, we note that the direction “*Silence*” has been transformed into a pure void, as it were, by the engineer for *BBC C*—it is almost as if the listener is reminded of the capability of the engineer, that the latter, if need be, can create a *sheer* silence, a perfect counterweight to a mix of voices and sounds. A comparison between *BBC C* and the University of London production of *Cascando* will show that, depending on the recording and engineering circumstances, silences may reach the listener’s ear with full spatiotemporal potential. None of the silences in *BBC C* offers much evidence to the kind of “image” that we have discussed so far. By contrast, the University of London *Cascando*, which is a rather straightforward studio recording with some solid and not-too-sophisticated engineering, allows the listener to feel *space* between the actors and the instrumentalists throughout the play; each silence feels more like a moment of pause, when the performers rest for a brief second and prepare for what is to come.³ If we borrow another of Prieto’s terms, albeit this time for our own purposes, *BBC C* is a “success” in its own right—the production has upheld the play-text by turning the problem of “spatialization/temporalization” on its head.

It is practically impossible for us to re-live the kind of listening condition that a typical radio audience in the 1950s and the 1960s must have taken for granted. I fully realise that my “experience,” in analogy to Zielinski quoted above, of listening to the CD version of *BBC WM* or *BBC C* can only be a partial replication of what must have transpired during the premiere broadcasting of the production. There are two assumptions which we should keep in mind when listening to the CD version of a Beckett play for radio: 1) the sound has lost, and acquired, some acoustic qualities which we would have detected, and would not have found, in the original “output”; and 2) the original “output” refers, on the one hand, to the pristine product itself and, on the other, to the radio station broadcasting that product. It is with regard to the second assumption that *All That Fall*, a play which “remains the easiest, most palatable of Beckett’s radio-dramatic writing” (Richardson and Hale 278), stands apart from either *Words and Music* or *Cascando*, and, for that matter, from *Embers*. Albright’s interpretation of the directions in the final section of *All That Fall* proves particularly relevant here. He first sums up the seemingly naive approach that Beckett has chosen to take:

On the face of it, it seems puzzling that Beckett would behave so submissively with respect to both content (by limiting himself to the grossest commonplaces of radio, especially the tapping of the blind man’s stick) and form (by dogged obedience to chronology—the characters in the radio play and the listeners to the radio play are governed by the same clock.) (Albright 105; original parentheses)

To show that such naivety is a foil to Beckett’s acute awareness of radio being nothing but a medium, Albright brings to our attention the play’s concluding section, which goes as follows:

MRS. ROONEY. What was it, Jerry?

JERRY. It was a—

MR. ROONEY. Leave the boy alone, he knows nothing! Come on!

MRS. ROONEY. What was it, Jerry?

JERRY. It was a little child, Ma’am.

(*Mr. Rooney groans.*)

MRS. ROONEY. What do you mean, it was a little child?

JERRY. It was a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma’am. (*Pause.*) On

to the line, Ma'am. (*Pause.*) Under the wheels, Ma'am.
(*Silence. Jerry runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. They halt. Tempest of wind and rain.*) (*All That Fall* 187-88)

According to Albright, the direction "*Tempest of wind and rain*" is not simply "a final cue to the sound engineer" (111); the "tempest" may possibly refer to the moment when "the play [. . .] finally succeed[s] in detuning itself completely" (111). The job of the engineer, then, would be to create the kind of noise that might even prompt the listener, on the receiving end of the radio transmission, to reach out for the tuner on his or her radio: "[H]aving reviewed the whole AM bandwidth, *All [T]hat Fall* shrugs, surrenders its attempt to divide sounds into discrete words and tappings and cheeps and moos and roars, falls into an indiscriminate mixture of frequencies" (Albright 111). If it is on the radio with a dial tuner that *All That Fall* exerts its force, we find *Words and Music*, *Cascando*, and *Embers* more suitable for the kind of listening "experience" which is cut off from either the concept or the practice of radio transmission.

Douglas Lanier touches upon the problem of "soundspace" (431) in his article "Shakespeare on the Record," where he discusses two sound collections from the 1990s, "Shakespeare for the Millennium" by the BBC and the Arkangel Shakespeare (430):

Many of the BBC and Arkangel series use the now familiar stage and film technique of resituating the play's action in a new time frame [. . .]. But most striking is the emphasis on sound effects and music rather than spatial placement within the audio image to dramatize the action. [. . .] Characters often speak not within a physical soundspace but rather against the backdrop of a hyper-real or sleekly designed symbolic "environment." (431)

Are we to understand that nowadays we the listeners expect a Beckettian flavour even from a sound production of a Shakespeare play? If the question simply points to our wish to get hold of an "output" which has a self-contained value rather than being a recording of, or something that *sounds like* a recording of, what has taken place in actual space and time, we might indeed marvel at how advanced the play-texts of *Words and Music* and *Cascando* were and how robustly "in the manner of *musique concrète*" (Porter 441) both *BBC WM* and *BBC C* still sound today. It nevertheless will be important for us to remember that the engineered "spatialization/temporalization" in either *BBC WM* or *BBC C* will have undergone further manipulations, with more machines as well as more human

hands being involved, before it reaches our ears. We can trust our ears so long as we know that there are limits to it.

Notes

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1. I discussed the “dialogue” between Words and Music from a slightly different point of view in Yagi, “Samuel Beckett and a Radio Play.”

2. In fact, the spatiotemporal structure of *Embers* is much more complex than it is indicated here; see Yagi, “The Listener as a Mediator.”

3. For a closer analysis of the University of London *Cascando*, see Yagi, “Dots in *Cascando*” 84–86.

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