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The article presents Samuel Beckett's television plays as images of exhaustion. It focuses on Quad 1 + 2, Ghost Trio, ...but the clouds..., and Nacht und Träume, which were all aired in England on the BBC and in Germany on SDR in the late-1970s and early-1980s. Exhaustion as a creative state is spontaneous, fecund and unprecedented in the forms it creates; seeming impossibilities overflow the exhausted image. Creative exhaustion also differs from fatigue, though the latter is a condition of the former. With their internal mechanics of vacuum-sealed cathode rays, electromagnets and phosphorescent glass screens, analog television sets were perfectly suited in the mid- to late-20th century to present images of exhaustion. Light radiates out from the inner core of sets. Electrically charged particles give off photons, which light the television screen from within. Beckett's television plays are images of exhaustion as surreal, overabundant presentations of impossible forms and unprecedented events.

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Beckett's Image of Exhaustion: The Late Television Plays

All illuminated, electrically brilliant. Light aglow, no darkness, no lack or absence. Radiating outward to the ends of visibility in Beckett's primary color: gray light, graying light, light grayness. "Faint, omnipresent," Beckett insists of the gray light, "[from] [n]o visible source. As if all luminous. Faintly luminous. No shadow. No shadow."[1] Wherever there is translucence there is light, and so there is the televisual image. A different kind of image than one painted or drawn or filmed. A full – an overfull – image, incandescent. It shows and shows, as wide and bright as light itself.

Image, image, all is image. Ever, always more, exceedingly brilliant. Such is the televisual image in principle, or in fundamental form. Then there is the made image: envisioned by the artist and realized in the recording studio and on screen. Further, there is the seen image: broadcast into homes, television viewers gathered around their sets to watch what's on. This difference, between the televisual image *en forme* and the recorded, broadcast, and watched image lends the latter its aged, tired semblance. We contain, direct, and focus light to create specific images: characters on sets stage scenes to tell stories. We impart on the image our own fatigue, that is, our tiredness in its pursuit and our trying attempts to create it. Deleuze, whose reflections on Beckett and exhaustion inform our present efforts, writes of the artist's work of image-making,

> It is extremely difficult to make a pure image, unsullied, that is nothing but image, arriving at the point where it suddenly appears in all its singularity [...] and ascending into the indefinite as into a celestial state.[2]

Effortless light made trying image, and so the latter's gray hue in Beckett's late television plays. The artist, and we as viewers,

come between light and image. Unable to begin from the image's "sudden appear[ance]" and "singularity," we arrive at both belatedly. By trying (and failing), and trying again, we arrive at the pure image, made impure, as it were, by our very efforts to create it. Beckett's gray is the color of coming late to the image – despite and because of our best creative efforts. Beckett's gray is also the color of late creation, or the image of exhaustion.

But to begin, light and image, or what Deleuze calls "the pure image." The image is diffuse light. Unbound, brightness fades to seeming black over distance. Such is the sun, original to the image because the origin of all light. From its nuclear core, sunlight shines more and less brightly on near and distant planets finally to the far reaches of the galaxy dark in fully diffuse rays. The glowing televisual image exhausts itself in sun-like fashion on a smaller scale and in so doing ends. Light dissipates over distance and just past the point of darkness opaque matter – a frame – is put. Aligned with the inner edge of the frame the image reaches its end. But contiguity is not identity. The image ceases of its own accord and by its own internal process. The set is not first designed and built for the image later to be added. Rather, the image determines its setting from the inside-out proportionate to its initial intensity and the distance it can travel before becoming unfocused. A star a million times the size of our sun would bathe its galaxy in white-hot light. A light source so vast would from sufficiently far away produce a universe-size image. Within the limits of glass and metal and transmitted electric current, that is, within the material confines of the analog television set, the image shrinks to seeable size.

An 8-inch or 12-inch screen is molded to encircle the light at the limits of its dark diffusion. At that limit non-transparent stuff is built to divide light from non-light, that is, image from frame. Television sets tended to be dark-colored – perhaps to direct attention away from their material frame inward to the image on screen. There, there is light and image; here, there is matter and

invisibility; between, an impervious boundary. Essentially different though built side-by-side, the light image and the frame of non-translucent stuff, whether plastic, metal, or wood: such is the twofold materiality of the television image and set. Frame aside, the televisual image in its basic materiality is the image of exhaustion in four senses. We will take these in turn in what follows.

A first sense in which the image is exhausted: light diffused across space reaches its own limits and falls into darkness. Light's tendency always toward its limit imbues the image with exhaustion, however immediately bright it begins. Completely diffuse light, which is to say, irradiance, is the non-image at the heart of the image, i.e., the non-visible limit within the visible. It is different, this limit, than the lightless frame around the image. Matter is many things: stable, solid, impermeable, etc. Matter is not, however, in a perpetual state of exhaustion. Matter breaks down over time, reshaped and wrecked by external forces. All aglow, the image exhausts itself internally. The ends of the image are this inner exhaustion made manifest. What emerges is a non-image that is still essentially light and image – now simply diffuse and dark.

Light creates darkness as its seeming opposite by burning itself out over distance. Hence the need to distinguish the dark frame of the television set from the darkness light dissipates itself into as it travels from its source. Light also overfills the televisual image with surreal forms – amalgams, anomalies, haunted and haunting figures. Such forms are neither illusions nor misperceptions: they are real aspects of analog television. We would tend to count both darkness and the strange light forms of the image as nothing or as unreal. The televisual image, rather, presents the impossible reality of both. Darkness and nothing are (distant) light, as phantasms and ghosts are (intense) light. Exhaustively, the televisual image creates beyond the bounds of

such tired binaries as light/dark and being/non-being.

In a second sense, the image repeatedly exhausts itself. Intense at every point, the image is a collection of innumerable bursts of energy firing in quick succession. Points flash, dim, and flash again; countless others all over flash and dim and flash. The rate at which the image exhausts itself in this way at every point and over and over is faster than human perception. Oversaturated, the eye sees the rapidly firing light as a steady on-screen image. Charge an electron above an energy threshold, produce a photon when the electron decays to its previous state. Charge again, light again, charge again, and so on. In a sealed vacuum, the rise and fall of electrons glows green-blue. Were the end of the vacuum tube the screen of the image, the latter would be light at full intensity as bright as the electrical charge received and discharged by the electrons. Such an image would also be minutely small: a barely visible point of rapidly flickering light. Projected across the short distance from the end of a vacuum tube to the inner concavity of a glass screen, the image enlarges to seeable size.

Charged photons in vacuum tubes and light projected onto glass describes, briefly, the material make-up and physics of analog television: the predominant medium of the image throughout the mid-20th century. Mechanically, electromagnets and anode attractors were built into sets to focus light from the rear cathode ray tube onto the glass screen. Without such guides, electron light would radiate out in every direction from the clear cathode. Television would not have been a picture box but a light box. Peering in through the screen would have been like staring at the sun: a burst of blinding light. Directing the stream of charged electrons, electromagnets, and anodes focused the light into particular images.

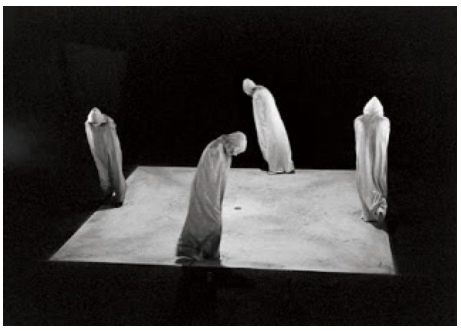
Increasingly throughout the 1930s and 40s, televisions became more affordable and available to the public. By the mid-1950s, sets were common in homes around the world. Switched on cold,

the sets warmed to receive high frequency electric signals from transmission towers; later, radio signals came in directly through cables. The screen would light up. At first, only a pinprick of light would appear; then, light and dark lines rolled across the screen, which were stabilized with horizontal and vertical hold knobs on the set; gradually, a show's title sequence and actors in character, scenery, sets, and all the rest would emerge from the background glow. It is in this historical past, and for this technology, that Beckett wrote, directed, and produced a series of television plays between 1966 and 1982 for the BBC in England and Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) in Germany.

Quad 1 + 2, *Ghost Trio*, *...but the clouds...*, and *Nacht und Trä ume* were of the technological moment because they are television plays, not plays live-staged and recorded for later broadcast. Beckett separates the play from its familiar trappings: i.e., performance in front of a live audience, action confined to a stage, dialog, theatrical lighting and set design, etc. The works for the BBC and SDR are plays in a different sense: television plays specific to their genre and technology. Famously, Beckett insisted on genre specificity: "I am absolutely opposed to any form of adaptation with a view to [the radio play *All That Fall* 's] conversion into 'theatre'. It is no more theatre than *Endgame* is radio and to 'act' it is to kill it."[3] More pointedly, "[i]f we cannot keep our genres more or less distinct [...] [then] we might as well go home and lie down."[4] Accordingly, Beckett's television plays must be taken for what they are: productions for and about their specific medium.

Equally, Beckett's television plays are not of their historical, technological moment, because they were shown in black-and-white long after color sets were commonplace. Gray image, graying image, image in grayness – colorlessly aglow: a deliberate choice by Beckett. One of the television plays, *Quad*, was initially shot and video-recorded in color. Post-production involved checking the color master against a black-and-white

copy to make sure it would "grade" to older television sets. Watching the color and monochromatic versions side by side, Beckett preferred the latter. Thus, *Quad 1 + 2*: companion pieces broadcast on SDR in October 1981 and on BBC2 in December 1982 with, respectively, the color signal included and the color signal removed.[5] The television play of hooded figures walking counterclockwise around each other on a raised platform under overhead light seemed from a "more distant fictional time" than color implied – so Beckett explains making *Quad 2* monochromatic.[6] Also, the black-and-white image is full in a way the color image never can be.



Quad © Samuel Beckett, 1984

We are biased toward the particular image, or, better, we have been conditioned by the history of the visual arts to attend to the image in piecemeal fashion. In the foreground of a Medieval Christian painting, for example, there is the start of the footpath up Mt. Calvary; perspective and lines of sight focus the eye of the viewer on Christ in the middle distance; in the background, the sun breaks through dark clouds. Familiar, this way of looking at paintings ever since the late Middle Ages. The image is taken to have a subject; the eye is trained to focus on it; other aspects of a painting are secondary or direct our gaze to the subject. Let us call this "particular imagery." There is another image, more basic, more comprehensive. The wood of Medieval paintings was first treated and then layered with mineral pigments. Later, canvases were prepared with acrylic gesso before oil paints were applied. The ground of a painting is laid atop a material base, whether wood, paper, or canvas. In the process, layers of the foundational, material image are concealed under particular, subject-focused imagery. We tend to neglect the image in itself, that is, the depths that comprise the painted image, as we tend

to overlook the ground of a painting for its figure. The same bias or conditioning directs the eye in watching color television. Initially, color sets glowed red-blue-green. A particular image would then come into focus around which, in a way, foreground and background were established. Still, the basic color field showed throughout the program; it was the image viewers watched unawares, focused, as they were, on the central characters and action.

Essentially, all images are light – to different degrees of intensity. The light image in itself is complete. The acrylic preparation of a modern canvas and the black-and-white background pattern of a mid-20th-century television set are in this sense image in a way painted figures and characters in scenes are not. The latter are particular images that divide up the image; color accentuates these divisions: e.g., a character in a bright-blue suit stands out against the white walls of a room. Shows shot with two or three cameras further fragment the image into discontinuous close-ups, tracking shots, and dissolves. The eye is trained inward from the (self-dissipating) frame to the action in the middle of the screen. Past or nostalgic effects of black-and-white aside, Beckett's choice to shoot the television plays without color connects the particular images of characters, scenes, and actions to the grayscale background that illuminates the whole screen. Beckett's use of a single fixed camera to shoot the plays further joins the particular image to the background black-and-white light.

Consider *Nacht und Träume* in this regard. Beckett wrote and produced the work over the course of winter 1982; it aired on SDR in May 1983. The darkness from which a seated man appears in soft light in the bottom left gradually fades back to black. Moments later, the same figure reappears in the upper right of the screen in dim white light. Again, the faint light fades to darkness. The monochromatic image, more black in this case than white, pervades the screen. The character that focuses the

image first in its bottom left and then top right stands out from and then blends back into a darkness that is both foreground and background.

The other television plays similarly coordinate particular images with the full image that spans the screen. For example, the hooded figures in *Quad 1 + 2* walk with centrifugal force, always tending to and over the edges of the raised platform they pace, always spinning outward into the darkness at the screen's edge. As Frost puts the general point: "All four [television plays] use the fluorescence of the small screen to create a kind of spectral poetry composed of image, lighting, movement [...] and textures of grey."[7] Characters emerge from darkness into light, deliver their lines, and dissolve back into the grayscale background of which they were part all along.



Nacht und Träume © Samuel Beckett, 1984

The plays return the televisual image to its constituent elements. What covered an analog television screen at first and as long as the set was on was a horizontal rake pattern: alternating dark-and-light lines that flickered gray. A top-down, left-to-right vertical pattern was interlaced with horizontal lines. At the interstices of the two patterns images appeared from the background gray. In monochrome, appearance is not separation, no more than the constant grayness is background. Characters and actions in black-and-white remain part of the gray glow of the whole image. Beckett shows us again and again how the gray light image remains one with the different images that appear within it. By contrast, the color television image falls to pieces: golden fields stand out from green trees against a dark, rocky mountain range. Plot, character development, a voiceover, etc. reassemble the fragmented color image into a coherent

program. But the image is not a narrative, as a radio piece, by Beckett's genre-specific standards, is not a stage-acted play. Television is its own medium, specifically alight in its presentation of the image. *...but the clouds...*, *Ghost Trio*, and the other plays are about lightness and darkness as constitutive of the televisual image; better, the plays are presentations of the constitutive lightness-and-darkness of the image.[8] Again, *Nacht und Träume* makes this most apparent in consisting of little else than light and dark repeatedly expanding and contracting into one another.

Beckett's television plays present the light-and-dark image – the gray-glowing image – in full, direct manner, which is to say, as the image of exhaustion. Exhaustion is different than fatigue. Tiredness is the result of ongoing effort over time; fatigue is a low, depleted state. Ever tried, ever failed, we try again and fail again. In this way, we wear ourselves down into passivity and isolation. In the end we tire and die. It is only the tired who die: death is fatigue as a permanent state. The man nodding off by candlelight in *Nacht und Träume* seems tired; the pitch black into which he dissolves seems to be his death. He dreams, though, and in this shows himself to be exhausted like the television image of which he is part. The exhausted televisual image always produces other, spectral forms: sleeping characters, for example, who dream of themselves aglow awaking to the touch – on head and hand – of a disembodied hand that emerges from the dark.

Exhaustion comes after possibility. As long as we try, we tire. Exhaustion is a state after the end of effort. Not that all possibilities have been gone through one by one and realized or rejected; rather, possibility stops operating as a problem. Exhaustion folds all prior possibility into itself and recasts it as chance. Exhaustedly, we experience what was, what might have been, and what may be as the sum total of life, and in so doing allow chance to happen. Exhaustedly, we create unprecedented forms in impossible ways. As Deleuze puts it in reflecting on Beckett's television plays, "[exhaustedly] you combine the [...]

variables of a situation [...] [without] preference and [without the] organization of [a] goal."[9] The exhausted figure in *Nacht und Träume* dreams of himself dreaming of himself; so potent is this strange image that it absorbs the darkness into itself: gray aglow, dreams [*Träume*] outshine the night [*Nacht*].

To borrow and repurpose a line from Beckett: tired, we cannot go on; exhausted, we go on and on. Bent over, head hung heavy, hair in matted tangles, the central male figure in *Ghost Trio* looks tired. It is hard to imagine him moving or speaking, hard to imagine him even rising from the bench in the middle of his colorless room.



Ghost Trio © Samuel Beckett, 1976

Close up, we find he is adjusting the volume on a small tape player until bars of Beethoven's Piano Trio No. 5 in D major – Beethoven's *Geistertrio*, from which the television play takes its title – become audible. The seated male figure is not an image of fatigue, but of exhaustion. He is music-making. Suddenly, he raises his hands and arms, throws back his head on command from an omniscient voice. Soon, the man is up pacing the room checking the door and windows. This is the image of exhaustion: potent, fecund, spontaneous. A young boy appears outside the door, conjured or remembered or imagined, the television image exhausted to the point of creation *ex nihilo*. The boy's appearance is not one possibility among others – calculations of such kind are for the tired. The boy's sudden coming is pure chance; the exhausted image presents it at the limit and beyond the bounds of all that happens and could happen in the room.

Exhaustion in a third sense occurs after the end of possibility. Spontaneously, impossibly creative, the exhausted image is replete with ghosts, memories made flesh, the living dead, and so

on. These all seem unreal because we are used to calculating probable outcomes from among familiar possibilities. Again, Deleuze: "[Exhaustion] does not mean [...] fall[ing] into indifferentiation, or into [...] contraries," both of which are divisive, disjunctive states – properly associated with tiredness rather than exhaustion. "[The exhausted is] not passive," Deleuze continues, it is a pressing on "toward nothing."[10] Strange nothings, those of exhaustion: irradiant light, non-images, spectral dream figures, disembodied faces and voices, etc. Altogether, Deleuze refers to this as the "ghostly dimension" of Beckett's late television plays;[11] Gontarski positions Beckett's ghosts between reality and surreality:

> What appears [on screen] as a something, a material object, a body, perhaps, or body part, is not always fully present, something not quite wholly material, nor quite simply immaterial or ethereal either, something in between presence and absence [...] [between] matter and image.[12]

It took little conjuring for Beckett to bring forth the phantasms that haunt the television plays. The televisual image is itself rife with the surreal, or what Deleuze calls "the virtual." Ever overfull, light exceeds the image on screen, appearing now as the aura around a character, next as golden threads that run between scenes in trails and traces. As the light is really there on screen, so too is the extra-imagery. The boy in *Ghost Trio* is a real ghost, or a living, present memory; he is no mere figment of the imagination or trick of editing.

...but the clouds..., written in 1976 and aired on BBC2 in April 1977, concludes with the real nothingness of exhaustion. A male figure repeatedly crosses left-to-right from darkness into a small center circle of light, from front-to-back into darkness, and the same in reverse, that is, from back-to-front and right-to-left. As he goes, he recalls his daily wanderings and readies for bed: "Came in, having walked the roads since break of day, brought

night home [...] Shed my hat and greatcoat, assumed robe and skull [cap]."[13] In the end, the figure's musings change from the probable somethings of the day to the exhausted nothings of night.

> There was of course a fourth case, or case naught [...] in the proportion say of nine hundred and ninety-nine to one, or nine hundred and ninety-eight to two, when I begged in vain, deep down into the dead of night, until I wearied, and ceased, and busied myself with [...] nothing, busied myself with nothing.[14]

The image of exhaustion is a nothing utterly unlike logical contradiction or calculable probability, as irradiant light is absolutely unlike lightless, lifeless matter. The nothing of exhaustion is light at the limits of self-dissipation; it is the nothing of the non-image that emerges from and shines out of the image. So exhaustively radiant is the image that it creates unprecedented, impossible forms – captivating in their thrall.

The televisual image is not one type of image among others. It is the exhausted image *per se*. Analog television's historical situation should not distract from how unprecedented it is. The painted image is a play of reflected and refracted light. The figures, shapes and forms, and all else in a painting are visible because oil and acrylic absorb certain wavelengths of light and reflect and refract others. What appears red in a painting is every color other than red, as is painted blue, painted green, etc. Drawn images are similar. Ink on paper acts as a barrier around which light moves to make the drawing visible. Light is fundamental to painted and drawn images, but it is redirected light. The analog television image is direct light: directed, but unmediated. Charged electrons in the closed cathode ray tube discharge their excess energy as photons. Drawn forward electromagnetically, the photons light the glass screen. The televisual image is a photon array just barely diffused. The charcoal of a drawing, or the wood of an etching are light

absorbers; like the material frame of the television set, they are non-translucently dark. The glass, metal, and magnets of an analog television set are light conductors, directing photons as they fire toward the screen. The televisual image is in this sense immaterial: the matter of the set dematerializes into the streaming light.

The televisual image is presented directly. We do not see the image of something else when we watch television, we see light itself – projected far enough from its source to form an image. As light media, the camera and film in ways anticipate analog television. A lens allows light directly into a camera box. Photo-chemical paper absorbs the light exposure and later becomes the photographic image. Photos of friends and loved ones, scenic vistas from vacations, are representational: stand-ins for times and persons past. Fittingly, Barthes in *Camera Lucida* names photography's *noeme*, its basic meaning, as "that-has-been."[15] Barthes emphasizes the "that" in "that-has-been" to remind us of the reality of the pictured referent; in turn, the "has been" designates the pastness of the real referent. The photograph itself is a record of direct light exposure. Again, Barthes: "[The chemical] discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light [...] made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object."[16] The camera is the analog television set turned inside out. Pouring in through the lens, light leaves traces on photo-sensitive paper; later, the image appears once the exposed paper is extracted and developed. Because of this production process, the photographic image comes after the fact. By contrast, the light streaming onto the glass screen is immediately the televisual image. The presence of the light (of the) image is stored on photo-sensitive paper and later retrieved by developing the photograph – this is what Barthes calls the picture's "*punctum*."[17] This same presence – of light (and) image – is on direct display in television.

Film is photography in motion. The projector shines light

through strips of stills, which appear animated on the screen at the far end of the theater. The film image is full and direct. Projected light pours forth, unmediated, non-refracted; the screen, rightly placed and sized, defines the light into a series of images. If light directly projected onto a translucent surface characterizes the televisual image, film is its closest predecessor. Yet, the televisual image overflows with light. The film image, rather, is poor – repeatedly interrupted by gaps between stills. Film strips are projected slower than the rate of visibility; continuity is imagined; continuous motion is a trick of the eye. The televisual image is exhausted; the film image is tired. Beckett shows us this in *Film*, which he made about ten years before the television plays.

Written in 1963 and filmed in New York in the summer of 1964, *Film* is a composite of two different camera perspectives: a point-of-view shot Beckett designates "E" – for "eye" – in the script, and an objective perspective called "O" (object). *Film* alternates between E- and O-viewpoints, that is, between what the protagonist sees in walking a city block, climbing the stairs of his building, and retiring to his barren room, and the same figure in wide-brimmed hat and greatcoat shot from behind as he goes about his activities, e.g., covering a mirror with a heavy blanket, flipping through an envelope of old photographs, staring at a lithograph of a totemic head on the wall, etc.



Film © Samuel Beckett, 1967

Until the end of the short film, E and O never align, not perfectly. What the protagonist sees and does is disjointed from the objective, cameral perspective on his seeing and doing.[18] The perspectival disjunction in *Film* represents the gaps between stills in all film: Beckett's eponymous title tells us his short piece is about its medium. 24 frames per

second, the standard frame-rate for film, is too slow for the human eye. But moviegoers do not see the blank spans between stills. The eye, optic nerve, and occipital lobe function together fast enough in our perceptual system to fill in the missing parts. Optical images, as it were, are produced between the brain and eye as supplements to the film; these images make the movement on screen appear fluid and continuous. Beckett breaks the seeming continuity of the film image by misaligning the two perspectives that make up *Film*. Jump cuts further disrupt the seamlessness of the short film, as when the O-to-E perspective suddenly shifts from watching the protagonist cover a bird cage to an extreme close-up from the protagonist's perspective of the bird's eye slowly blinking. Incomplete, the film image is slow and tired. As if to make this point, Beckett has a one-eyed, aged Buster Keaton play the part of *Film*'s weary protagonist.

There is always more to the televisual image. How could there not be given its direct display of light? Light is expansive, shining through every translucent thing in its path. Light and dark are not opposites because there is no relationship between them. Light is light, intense at its source, diffuse at a distance. The televisual image is equally expansive. The size and proportion of cathode ray tube to screen could be ever increased; the televisual image could be shown in giant size. Whatever limits seem to bind the image are material and economical. Television is and always has been a commercial medium. Mass appeal and easy accessibility are fundamental considerations; sets must be affordable and must fit easily in living spaces; popularity dictates what gets aired and when. Significant, then, that Beckett's non-commercial and anti-popular television plays were made and broadcast for a general viewership. And that the television plays are about their medium, not as a commercial enterprise but as a unique form of the image – what we have called, throughout, the "televisual image." Gontarski offers the following as Beckett's

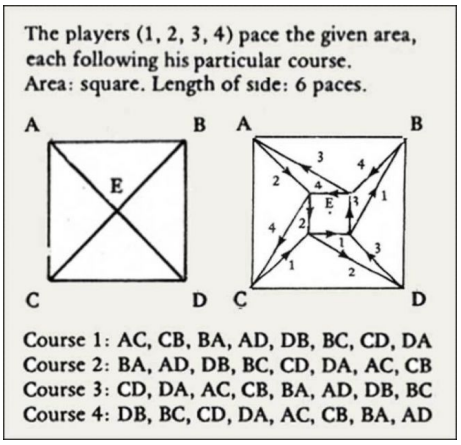
motive for working in television: "[U]nprodded, uncoaxed by anything save the challenges of the medium,"[19] *Quad 1 + 2*, *...but the clouds...*, etc. are presentations of the televisual image in all its luminous excess.

The exhausted image is overfull of doubled figures, light trails, distended bodies, etc. Allowing the televisual image to extend to and beyond its apparent limits, Beckett shows off its extra-imagery. A detail of *Ghost Trio* helps make this point. Beethoven initially composed the Piano Trio in D major as part of an opera of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As the producer Martin Esslin explains in an interview on *Shades*, the BBC program that aired Beckett's television plays, "this trio has always been called the Ghost Trio [...] [because] Beethoven had been thinking of writing an opera on Macbeth and he used sketches for the theme for the three witches."[20] An especially haunted tragedy, *Macbeth*, rife with witches, ghosts, apparitions of severed limbs and dead children and Lady Macbeth driven mad by unwashable bloodstains. Beckett uses the fifth Piano Trio for his television play and titles the work after the composition because of its association with *Macbeth* and Beethoven's unwritten opera. In draft forms of *Ghost Trio*, whose working title was *Tryst*, Beckett had the seated male figure broadcast part of a quartet by Schubert from his tape-player.[21] Retitled and rescored before airing on BBC2 in April 1977, Beckett's television play comes to be about its own exhausted excesses: Beethoven's haunting music, the disembodied voice who commands the man from outside the room, and the ghostly boy who appears at the door – all extra-images of the televisual image overfull of light.

The excesses of exhaustion are real, not figments of the imagination or optical illusions. Unlike the gaps in film that prompt the eye to fill in missing parts, the brilliance of the televisual image overfills the screen with gleaming extras: e.g., a figure sweeps through a room, trailing traces of their prior position behind them, gestures continue even after the actor

stops moving, objects superimpose on each other to create chair-table-lamp and plant-bookshelf-mirror amalgams. All real, these extra-images. Analog television screens were coated with phosphor material. Photons pouring forward from the cathode ray tube lit the phosphorescent screen from within. Phosphor materials retain accumulated charge: coolly glowing at first, they become incandescent as the set warms. However steady and clear the image on the screen, characters passing each other on a staircase would still blur into each other, remnants of a previous shot would carry over into the next shot: e.g., the waves crashing on a beach in one shot would be visible in the fireplace in the next. By the tired logic of possibility and probability, two persons cannot occupy the same space and time, as fire and water are opposing elements. Exhausted, the televisual image is creative beyond all bounds: (seeming) impossibilities abound.[22]

Beckett uses the glowing excesses on the television screen to complete the image of *Quad 1 + 2* – especially the monochromatic *Quad 2*. Repeatedly, the four cowled figures pace around each other on a raised platform; a bare light shines down on them from above; the scene is dark at its edges. The figures' motion around the platform and around one another creates trails of light across the phosphorescent screen. Beckett's minimal script diagrams this aspect of the play, intersecting, spiraling lines that without television technology – specifically, without the light lines left in the screen's phosphor material – would not appear in the image.[23]



Quad © Samuel Beckett, 1984

A playwright of strongly material bent, Beckett always made the staging, and indeed the physical stage and the actors' embodiment, central to his theatrical works. Similarly, *Quad 1 + 2* and the other late plays are about the matter of television. As Brater puts the point in reference to *Nacht und Träume*, "[t]he images [of the television plays are] always concrete, as if their visualization, not their meaning, [a]re [Beckett's] true subject." Continuing, Brater likens the television plays to dramas written not with words but with "the basic material of television, [namely] video images."[24] There are yet more basic materials to television than video images: charged electrons, vacuum tubes, radio waves, phosphorescent screens, or, most basically, light.

The image always in excess, overfull, radiantly bright. Ideal, such over-abundance. Light ever-expanding; the image doubled and tripled, endlessly adding to itself. Or what is the same in terms of exhaustion: creativity without end – beyond effort and possibility. The artist's ideal, exhaustive image-creation: endlessly repeatable and transformable. Creative exhaustion is different than the familiar artistic process of making, remaking, failing, and starting again. Yet, to exhaust themselves the artist first has to tire themselves and their medium out. Deleuze offers *Watt*, one of Beckett's early novels, as an example of tiring possibilities: "[It is a] series of footwear (sock–stocking, boot–shoe–slipper), or of furniture (tallboy–dressing-table–night-table–washstand, on its feet–on its head–on its face–on its back–on its side, bed–door–window–fire: fifteen thousand arrangements)."[25] To get to the point, finally, of creating the image, Beckett had to wear out the possibility of writing.

The late short prose pieces, written after about 1963–64, come

closest to image-making with words. Gradually, methodically, Beckett in the works separates words from sense, significance, and meaning. Non- or post-linguistic words are marks, curves, and lines on paper – almost images.

> All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just. Traces blurs light grey almost white on white.[26]

This passage, from *Ping*, reads programmatically, as do other of Beckett's late short fictions. Bodies are arranged first this way then that relative first to one object then another; objects are repeated and rearranged: e.g., a chair upright to the left of a dresser, a chair on its side to the right of a dresser, and so on. Occasionally, descriptive phrases give way altogether to series of thing- and place-marking letters: "[T]he head against the wall at B, the arse against the wall at A, the knees against the wall between B and C, the feet against the wall between C and A."[27] Meaning ceases as possibilities multiply and language wears out. With nothing to associate "C" with, or what it would mean to be between "C and A," writing becomes diagrammatic: spatial arrangements and space itself are presented prosaically.

Deleuze describes the language in Beckett's late short fictions as, "no longer relat[ing] [...] to objects [...] nor to transmitting voices."[28] No longer objective, nominal, or uttered, Beckett's late language, Deleuze concludes, is the language of "images, sounding[s], coloring[s]."[29] Rather, Beckett's language in the late short fictions is image-like: it is worn out from having tried every possibility; still, it is not creatively exhausted because sense and meaning cling to words, however strangely they are arranged. Most image-like of Beckett's late writing is the novel *How It Is* (1961), which was to be published as an unbroken, unpunctuated text block. Words without spaces in sentences without breaks

would together amass a black, image-like form on the white page. Perhaps this is as close as language can come to the completeness of the image: gapless, continuously printed across the page, black from left margin to right margin framed in white.

None of it exhaustion, though, these exercises at the limits of language and writing. The late short fictions are Beckett tiring himself out as a writer and tiring out his long-chosen medium. Then, after all, the late arrival at the televisual image; then, after all, creative exhaustion. Something of Beckett's trajectory from writer to image-maker remains in the television plays, instilling in them a fourth kind of exhaustion. The image is exhausted in coming late, or in being arrived at late in the artistic process. There is no starting with the image, not in its overfull radiance. The image is a late creation after all possibility, that is, after the fatiguing work of trying and failing and trying again. Though irreducible to and beyond the tired artist's drafts and revisions, the exhausted image is come to by this process. The despair of which Beckett often complains in his letters in the years of the television productions – "Work at a standstill. It feels so wrong and so refuses to budge [...] Might as well not be writing [the script of *Ghost Trio*] at all"[30] – and its slow overcoming lends the plays their aged color.

The image of exhaustion is gray because it comes late in the creative process. After tiredness comes exhaustion; the trying nature of the former colors the latter – different as the two states are. Bignell develops a similar thought by comparing the presence and present-tense temporality of the televisual image on screen to the non-presence and pastness of the video recording being broadcast from the studio. Beckett's television plays were not shown live. All were recorded, either on video or on film, days or weeks before airing on the BBC and SDR. That the action, as it were, of the television plays is often "remembered, re-told or re-enacted," according to Bignell, is

Beckett "exploit[ing] the tensions between tenses in television as a broadcast medium."[31] While always seemingly happening in real time, the televisual image is usually a later presentation of an earlier recording; making memory thematic in the plays highlights the past-presentness of television.

Whether put in terms of Beckett coming late to the image, as all artists do, or in terms of the diachrony of broadcast television, a lateness or an agedness colors the exhausted image. *...but the clouds...* is about the televisual image, old and gray: a late attainment in a creative life, but no less potent for its late-coming. Beckett takes the title from W. B. Yeats' *The Tower*. Specifically, Beckett includes part of the poem's last stanza: The "death of friends," or the "death of every brilliant eye that made a catch in my breath,"

> Seem but the clouds of the sky
> When the horizon fades;
> Or a bird's sleepy cry
> Among the deepening shades.[32]

Again, the television play consists of a series of repetitive acts. A male figure in hat and greatcoat moves from left to right – from darkness into a small center light – as he tells of his day and anticipates the night. The man also recalls a woman who, from the privacy of his "little sanctum," he begs to appear. The movement is then repeated in reverse. The figure emerges from darkness in nightshirt and sleeping cap and dresses as he prepares to go back out into the world. The homogeneity of the dark scene is broken by the sudden appearance of a woman's face aglow in ghostly light; she whispers the last lines of Yeats' poem and recedes back into darkness.



...but the clouds... © Samuel Beckett, 1977

Old and tired, witness to the death of friends and loved ones, aware of his body's growing decrepitude, Yeats' in *The Tower* describes a late-stage creativity wilder and wider than anything he knew before. "Decrepit age [...] has been tied to me [a]s to a dog's tail," and with it, Yeats reflects, an "[e]xcited, passionate, fantastical [i]magination" that expects the impossible.[33] Death, even, is not as it seems to the young still trying and still tiring: "[B]eing dead, we rise, [d]ream and so create."[34] Death-defying creativity, impossible imaginings: Yeats puts poetically the impossible, fantastical exhaustion Beckett realizes in the television plays.

Worried none of this would make sense, the producers at the BBC encouraged Beckett to include more of Yeats' poem in *...but the clouds...*. If the face that appears voiced Yeats' whole last stanza about the "wreck of body" and "slow decay of blood," viewers might be better able to understand the television play.[35] By then, Beckett was late in his creative life and beyond the tired work of words. Exhaustedly, Beckett was creating impossible images for television. Beyond fatigue, Beckett shows us, there are the clouds of the sky wholly unlike our tired trying and failing and trying again. Beyond meaning, sense-making, and possibility there is the exhausted image, endlessly shining on. More light, ever more light.

1 Shimon Levy, "Spirit Made Light: Eyes and Other I's in Beckett's TV Plays." *The Savage Eye / L'Œil Fauve: New Essays on Samuel Beckett's Television Plays*, ed. Catharina Wulf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 73.

2 Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann, *SubStance* vol. 24, no. 3, issue 78 (1995), 8–9.

3 Quoted by: Clas Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1976), 3.

4 Quoted by: Linda Ben-Zvi, "Samuel Beckett's Media Plays," *Modern Drama* vol. 28, no. 1 (March 1985), 24.

5 Jonathan Bignell, *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 30.

6 Ibid.

7 Everett Frost, "Preface," in: Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall and Other Plays for Radio and Screen* (New York: Faber and Faber), 21.

8 That the television plays are about the materiality of the televisual image, that they present the technology of cathode ray light and phosphorescent glass, etc. is a different claim than, for example, Johnson's assertion, "Beckett's [...] television plays are [...] examples of philosophical reflections *on the medium* [of television] *itself*" (Nicholas E. Johnson and Jonathon Heron, *Experimental Beckett: Contemporary Performance Practices* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020], 42). A philosophical reflection on the medium of television is not a television production – and always, Beckett insists in his work on genre and material specificity.

9 Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 3.

10 Ibid., 4.

11 Ibid., 14.

12 S. E. Gontarski, *Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). 160.

13 Samuel Beckett, *...but the clouds... The Complete Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 259.

14 Ibid., 261.

15 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

16 Ibid., 80.

17 Ibid., 40–41.

18 In "The Greatest Irish Film (Beckett's *Film*)," Deleuze makes a similar point. Given Berkeley's identification of being and being perceived, to be or become imperceptible seems impossible. Deleuze treats *Film* as an answer to the problem of impossible imperceptibility. Beckett, Deleuze argues, traverses the "three great elementary images of cinema, those of action, perception, and affection" (Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, eds. Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 26). Yet, the action image, perception image, and affection image never coincide at any point in the short film. The discontinuity between kinds of cinematic images represents, in a way, the discontinuous structure of film itself.

19 S. E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 112.

20 Graley Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

21 Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV: 1966–1989*, eds. Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 419.

22 Putting Beckett's television plays in terms of possibility and probability, Herren claims, wrongly, "[t]he televisual spectacle is by its very nature spectral; it is an illusion of light and sound; there is no *there* there" (Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays*, 4). Exhaustedly beyond possibility, Beckett's plays present the televisual image as it really is: a display of the realities – or surrealities – of light, electricity, glass, and metal.

23 Gardner identifies the movement of the four figures in *Quad 1 + 2* with Bergson's diagrammatic rendering of his theory of memory: an inverted cone depicting the co-existence of past and present: "[I]f we take [...] Bergson['s] cone and flatten it out [...] we have something approximating the geometric space of *Quad*'s *mise-en-scène*" (Colin Gardner, *Beckett, Deleuze and the Televisual Event: Peephole Art* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012], 164). Rather, the co-existence of past and present in Bergsonian memory is treated here as the co-extensiveness of the light that illuminates the figures' continuous movement and the dim trails of light left on the phosphorescent television screen. Memory's virtual reality is presented directly in *Quad 1 + 2*, as it is in the other television plays, in the interlaced light and dark that constitutes the televisual image.

24 Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 106.

25 Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 4.

26 Samuel Beckett, *Ping. The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 193.

27 Samuel Beckett, *Imagination Dead Imagine. The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 184.

28 Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 8.

29 Ibid., 9.

30 Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 420.

31 Bignell, *Beckett on Screen*, 28.

32 W. B. Yeats, "The Tower," idem, *The Tower* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 13–14.

33 Ibid., 8.

34 Ibid., 12.

35 Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 466.

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