

**FROM THE ABSURD THEATRE
OF SAMUEL BECKETT
TO THE FIGURATIVE AESTHETICS
OF POP ART CULTURE**

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Abstract: At the core of the Absurd Theatre lie the seeds of postmodernity. This article explains some of the possible features of the absurd that precede the emergence of new movements in Visual Arts. A contemporary reading of Beckett's plays viewed through the lens of pop culture could open new perspectives in approaching the work of this great playwright. An abyss of nothingness and a lack of horizons create the industrialization of the consumer society that postmodern humanity is forced to confront.

The seriality, the cloistered universe of the absurd theatre plays, the promise of an alienated happiness doubled by a decay and a desacralization of the hero-type character, foreshadow the aesthetic of the figurative arts in the pop culture. This cultural movement is represented and illustrated in this article by works of art signed by: Jasper Johns, Dmitri Vrubel, Claes Oldenburg, Arman and Robert Rauschenberg.

Keywords: Absurd Theatre, Samuel Beckett, New Realism and Pop Culture Art, Consumerism, Postmodernity and its self-understanding.

How to cite: Pop, Simona (2022). 'From the Absurd Theatre of Samuel Beckett to the Figurative Aesthetics of Pop Art Culture', *Concept 1*(24), pp. 142-154.

The premise that neo-dada and pop-art culture are inspired by a series of aesthetic concepts and ideas that were formulated in the drama of the avant-garde theatre of the mid-20th century should come as no surprise, since all new movements are in some way opposed to the previous ones. But it is interesting to follow factually, concretely, how this translation occurred through the critical-valourising method, text and image analysis, which led to the paradigm shift in the visual sphere, starting from the ideas that emerged in the elaboration of the Theatre of the Absurd texts.

Researchers (Emmanuel Jacquart, Stéphane Lupasco etc.) concluded that what the theatre of the absurd proposed as a vision in the context of the 1950s and 1960s was an acceptance of the human condition in the integrity of mystery and the lack of escape from the horizonless universe to which each individual is circumscribed.

What playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, or prose writers such as Sławomir Mrożek, Václav Havel, Günter Grass, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt or Peter Weiss, tried to achieve through their creations was precisely this opposition to avant-garde poetics that promoted oneirism, symbolism and attachment to poetic discourse, to texts adapted to the figurative stage, which had the structures of poems.

At the time of its dissemination, the theatre of the absurd was part of the "anti-literature" movement, which was based on an attitude diametrically opposed to that of the avant-garde. The language was revised, liberated from the tutelage of lyricism or alleged realism. Most of the traditional mechanisms used by playwrights before the advent of this type of theatre used to be hidden from the audience. In the theatre of derision, conventions began to be ostentatiously displayed so that the depth of the grotesque and of the contradictions between the spoken word and the concrete portrayal of the characters became apparent to the spectator.

In the chapter "Experiența Teatrului" ("The Experience of the Theatre"), an integral part of the volume *Note și contranote (Notes and Counter notes)*, Eugène Ionesco expressly asks critics to follow and appreciate this new kind of distancing in a fair way:

The value of theatre lies in thickening the effects [...] One must not hide the strings, but make them even more visible, deliberately obvious, go into the depths of the grotesque, into caricature, beyond the pale irony of the witty drawing-room comedies. Not drawing-room comedy, but farce, extreme parody charge. Humour, yes, but with the means of burlesque. (1992, p. 54)

This revolution of language at the level of conception is translated into directorial terms by the passage from the poetics of the word to that of the concrete metaphor of the scenic image. The poetics of theatre is no longer a poetics of language but becomes intrinsic to the visual plane itself. The archetypal situations depicted are translated through sequential associations, which refer to the experience of each spectator:

The writers of the absurd have demonstrated that the skill of theatre involves not only dealing with external reality, providing an accurate, concrete and photographic reconstruction of real life, but even, more interestingly, considering the vast field of *inner* reality – the fantasies, dreams, hallucinations, secret desires and fears of humanity. (Esslin, 1970, p. 223)

Thus, the emergence of the individual into the meaningless and orderless external universe in which he has been given to live is the starting point of the deep questioning of the self. This inner, metaphysical imbalance of the characters created by the authors who generated this literary movement is the very term for the *absurd*. In musical language it means "disharmonious", without clearly defined meaning or purpose.

The historical context of the 1960s undoubtedly influenced the emergence of this type of character: condemned to alienation, oppressed by social conventions and unable to communicate with his peers by establishing deep connections, emotional bonds – of friendship, solidarity, altruism. Humanity's disappointments and losses as a result of the Second World War, the nuclear threat, the setting up of the Communist regime and the Cold War have had obvious repercussions in the collective subconscious of humanity. The characters of this theatre, as proposed by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov or Eugène Ionesco, are therefore involuntarily prefigured under these auspices and psycho-social coordinates.

However, in the syntax of the scenic discourse, the characters' maladjustment to the habitat in which they are cloistered is only a distinctive, characterological and reflective element of the spectator's consciousness, not the key to an existential drama or personal identification. The actor who appropriates the absurd character often exposes it, shows it through self-referential comments.

In fact, the concept of the theatre of illusion has been totally reconfigured by absurdist playwrights, mainly because of the importance given to form at the expense of the psychological realism that characterises naturalistic drama. In a certain sense, this attitude is similar to the attempts made by Bertolt Brecht who, by defining the concept of *verfremdungseffekt*²⁹, succeeded in liberating theatre from traditional stage narrative and bringing before the spectator the mechanisms on which theatrical illusion finds its foundations. However, while Brechtian theatre aims at morality and social change, the theatre of the absurd works with a poetics of external imagery that can lucidly influence the psychological reality of each individual.

The same disarticulation at the level of scenic discourse, the visual purification of space imposed by the dramaturgical indications and the maladjusted, alienated character, lacking a horizon of salvation, also appears in Samuel Beckett's theatre. An abyss of nothingness singles out Samuel Beckett among authors belonging to the same trend.

Under the auspices of a radical agnosticism, Samuel Beckett uses silence as an existential void in his plays. There is no mystery or transcendental connection

²⁹ A concept first introduced by Bertolt Brecht in his article "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936), in which he suggests to actors that the purpose of their acting is not to identify the spectator with the characters they are watching, but rather, the purpose of the stage play should be for the spectator to consciously accept or reject the characters' actions

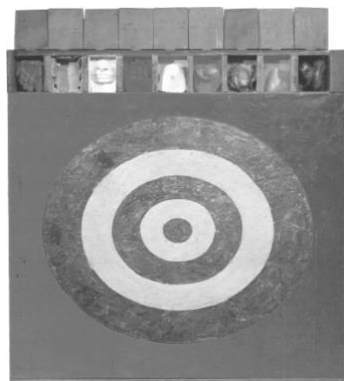
behind the words in his texts. The pauses or ellipses precisely indicated by the playwright in his creation have clearly defined purposes. They are not in opposition to dialogue or speech, to stage tirade, but exist only to dose the action or, conversely, to mark its absence.

As many writings and literary exegeses on Samuel Beckett's texts have pointed out, the play *Endgame* is one of the densest dramatic creations of its era for the 20th century theatre. That absolute austerity, the confinement determined by the stage space emptied of furniture, the mechanical play, the lack of ascending development of the main characters, Hamm and Clov – locked in boxed spaces, immobilised and brought into a state of peroration and permanent verbal confrontation – are key elements, defining his theatre. Words cannot be transformed into action, and the idea of going to sea seems to be the only solution the two protagonists have found at the moment to escape a continuous present, an *illo tempore*, which forces them to stagnate³⁰. The pressure of the present, of "a day like any other", leads to the obliteration of the past, of loss in oblivion and alienation. The territory of nothingness and temporal emptiness becomes, in itself, a sign of the impossibility of living. Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell become the vessels of their own illusions. Nell's statement, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett, 2000, p. 39), represents the essence of the desire to escape the cosmos of suffering through humour. This permanently failed attempt becomes visible on the physical plane by throwing and condemning the characters into the dustbin of the theatre and of the world.

The object-characters in *Endgame*, having reached a visible stage of poverty and degradation, can be assimilated to the idea of consumption, of the accumulation in the stage space of souls that have reached exhaustion and alienation. Less well known is the fact that Samuel Beckett collaborated on the set design for the play formed of eight short pieces, *Fizzles*, with the abstract pop expressionist visual artist Jasper Johns.

The work exhibited in 1968 at the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1967, entitled *Target with four faces*, by the American artist Jasper Johns, could be visually equated with the idea of the impossibility of escaping the cloistered world of Beckett's characters. The target is the encrypted message of an act of possible violence, of a threat in representation, but at the same time it is an abstract

³⁰ Clear references in the text to this idea: the grain sown by Clov that no longer grows, the waters that from the window appear to have waves of lead, etc.



symbol. The figurative becomes a tool for focusing attention on a visual content that exerts a latent pressure. Like the dialogue between Hamm and Clov:

Target with four faces – Jasper Johns

HAMM: Have you not had enough?

CLOV: Yes! (*Pause.*) Of what?

HAMM: Of this... this... thing.

CLOV: I always had. (*Pause.*) Not you?

HAMM (*gloomily*): Then there's no reason for it to

change.

CLOV: It may end. (*Pause.*) All life long the same questions, the same answers.
(Beckett, 2000, p. 29)

The concentric circle seriality of Jasper Johns' target generates a lack of progression and vision over time. Although, on the surface, this seriality may represent the essence of a well-determined purpose, the target masks a confusion of expression and logic. The man-object, as well as the lack or invasion of stage space with such anthropomorphic appearances, are oppositions of the same intention introduced by Samuel Beckett in the texts intended for stage and performance versions that can be created on the basis of his dramaturgical work.

The individual whom the poverty of spectacular thought has deeply marked (...) enters right from the beginning into the order, in the service of the established order even though his personal intention could have been totally contrary to this outcome. In essence, he will conform to the language of the spectacle, the only language he is used to: the language he was taught to speak. No doubt he will want to show that he is also hostile to its rhetoric; he will, however, use its syntax. This is one of the most important aspects of the success achieved by dominating the performance. (Debord, 2011, p. 62)

In fact, Jasper Johns's works from the 1970s was characterised by a purity and simplicity of form. Therefore, like Beckett's texts (in which the material of the text is of prime importance), his works were also, at the time of their appearance on the American art market, manifestos of innovation in terms of the materiality of the artistic object and the de-substantialisation of its content.

A phenomenon that characterised the New Realism in painting and pop-art culture was that of poetic recycling of the urban, industrial and consumer reality. Therefore, the object-characters in *Endgame* are symbolically the expression of a

world in danger of de-substantialisation. These cloistered characters, who have reached the edge of a world lacking orientation and spiritual content, aesthetically legitimise the consumer society of the 1960s.

The overconsumption and, by extension, the waste of words of Beckett's characters, their loquacity and physical imbalance are drawn from a kind of personal anamnesis. The characters exhaust themselves, seeking and failing themselves at every turn. Through intertextuality an ambiguous relationship is created with that of Shakespearean characters – "My kingdom for a nightman!" (Beckett, 2000, p. 43)³¹. The contribution of new, subsidiary meanings, which rest on iconic artistic formulas, disintegrating them, is for the theatre of the absurd the way to create its antitheatricality, but also the subtle form of exploring new realities. The abandonment of biographical characters and the hints of the existence of a fragment of easily recognisable characters, such as Hamlet, Richard III, accentuates the disintegration of the anecdotal and can be equated in the avant-garde pop-art movement with the process of mass production that emerged in the visual imaginary and the iconoclasm resulting from the integration of the process of illustration into painting and the figurative arts.

The cancellation of the uniqueness of Beckett's characters through the ostentation or stereotyping of their physical features returns them to the stage of simple animated clichés of emblematic characters, which in the visual arts has degenerated into a simple showcasing: "To create a rift between the visual of the auditorium and the visual of the stage, to make the individual disappear in order to use human material. To create an investigative scene. The human material appears, but it is equal in value to the performance with the object and the decor" (Légère, 1996, p. 117).

The lack of depth and profundity of Beckett's character is doubled by a painful physical infirmity, a premature ageing: a powerless tyrant in a wheelchair, a servant who cannot sit down, etc. Any attempt at illusion, hope or desire, is annihilated by the own image of a grotesque and formless self. Beckett's character is a form emptied of interiority that reacts violently, impulsively, mechanically and betrays its disembodiedness in its deformed physiognomy and disharmonious character. Like photographs touched by the patina of time, Hamm and Clov's projections are well-preserved but decaying:

³¹ Alluding to Richard III's famous line, Act. V, scene IV, "My kingdom for a horse!".

The strength of the images comes from the fact that they are material realities in themselves, rich repositories of information left behind by the source that generated them, powerful capacities to invert reality precisely because they turn it into a shadow. Images are more real than one could ever suspect. And precisely because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be drained by consumerist waste, there is good reason to apply a conservation remedy. (Sontag, 2014, p. 186)

Parallels of the visual planes in *Endgame* with well-known works by leading exponents of pop-art culture can also be imagined by reference to the content of the most tender, endearing and poetic moment in the fabric of the Beckettian text, namely the scene in which the two old men, Nagg and Nell, try to kiss, but the two garbage crates in which they are forced to live prevent their physical proximity:

NELL: What is it, my pet? (*Pause.*) Time for love?

NAGG: Were you asleep?

NELL: Oh no!

NAGG: Kiss me.

NELL: We can't.

NAGG: Try. (*Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.*)

NELL: Why this farce, day after day? (Beckett, 2000, p. 36)

The aspiration for love and happiness is not allowed to the two old men, and their attempts, although they take place daily, fail every time. A manifesto of the kiss in pop-art culture is Russian artist Dmitry Vrubel's well-known work on Berlin's East Wall, *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*, often referred to as *The Fraternal Kiss*.



Fraternal Kiss – Dmitry Vrubel



Giant Fagends – Claes Oldenburg

This graffiti reproduces the historic moment of the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the formation of the German Democratic Republic in 1979. The kiss between the two leading political figures of the time: Leonid Brezhnev and Eric Honecker, became a source of media scandal at the time of its creation. As a representative of mass culture, Dmitri Vrubel clearly wanted to reproduce such a moment in the centre of a cosmopolitan city like Berlin. In Samuel Beckett's case, the antiquated existentialism of his theatre is betrayed by the repetitiveness and failure of the kiss.

The idea of the trashcans-characters, Nagg and Nell, the object that has become an integral part of the character's physical body to the point of confusion and metamorphosis with it, can make reference to the cigarette butts piled up in the ashtray imagined by Claes Oldenburg, *Giant Fagends* (1967). The progressive extinction of a world takes place through the degradation of matter. The accumulation of objects makes it possible for them to coexist only through exclusion, like Beckett's characters:

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else. (*Pause*)

HAMM: You're leaving me all the same.

CLOV: I'm trying. (Beckett, 2000, p. 30)



Infinity of Typewriters + Infinity of Monkeys + Infinity of Time = Hamlet (Arman)

Hamm's nihilism cannot be authentic precisely because it is repetitive. Seriality is inevitable – "HAMM: The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (Beckett, 2000, p. 78). Moving forward is only an illusion, and the individual undergoes a continuous and automatic recycling. Happiness in Beckett's texts is similar to that in contemporary, industrialised society, it is confused with the asymptomatic nature of collective joy. This phenomenon has been defined by Abraham Moles as the *absence of alienation*. In his view, all objects that appear as stereotypes in works of art are messengers of kitsch, of alienation and, at the same time, tributes to the idea of general happiness.

If kitsch is not art, it is at least *the aesthetic mode of everyday life*, which refuses transcendence and settles in the sphere of the majority, in the middle ground, in the most likely system of distribution. Kitsch, we could say, is like happiness, we need it every day. (Moles, 1980, p. 218)

In *Endgame*, the idea of infinity arises because of the suspension in a time that flows repetitively, not linearly. A message of such temporal suspension and the alienation caused by it can be seen in Arman's work *Infinity of Typewriters + Infinity of Monkeys + Infinity of Time = Hamlet* (1962) in which an accumulation of typewriters inside a wooden box are immortalised. In the original, British version of the text, Hamm's line, "Our revels now are ended" (Beckett, 2006, p. 93), is an element of intertextuality that refers to Prospero's monologue in W. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Act IV, Scene I (1958, p. 113). Interestingly, the Romanian translations of Hamm's line allude to the motif of sleep and dream, the ontological argument for the emergence of theatre.

In fact, the very name of the character Hamm has been interpreted by critics as an element reminiscent of the Hamletian hero.

Hamm, the character who was the hardest for Beckett to create – in his most difficult play, on which he worked exhausted of powers for a long time – is a hero, even if his author wanted him to be the exact opposite. Hamm has the property of characters that, like Hamlet, defeat their author. Beckett put so much into him –

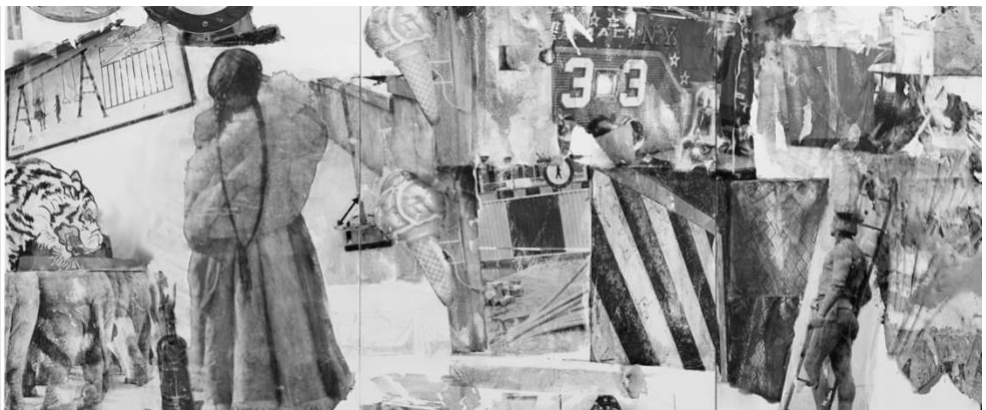
quotes, thoughts, ideas, sorrows, doubt, fear, horror, malice, bitterness – that he ended up creating a monster in a wheelchair who made up for it in the same way Hamlet made up for it against Shakespeare. (Saiu, 2009, pp. 48-49)

So, just as Arman desacralises the object, Beckett adopts the same procedure with the character. He immortalises it, evoking its decay. The practice of destroying the legendary, heroic, iconic aura of a character/object aims to nullify its value, to destroy it.

The spectator, like the admirer of a work of art, is ultimately a consumer who receives his status in relation to the work he receives. The allegory of the accumulation of objects, the deconstructions and cut-outs that Arman uses as working procedures, represents a revolt against mass consumption, the materialistic dimension to which the life of the individual in modern society is in danger of being limited.

In Samuel Beckett's absurd world nothing is what it seems. There is a distortion of voices coming out of Hamm.

Hamm is an imperfect totality of the Beckettian universe. A character with a body like a ruin, but with the vocation of an author. His biography retraces the trajectory of human history and retains the shattering *fiascos of art, reason and religion*. The play is not a parable, but Hamm is. (Saiu, 2009, p. 36)



Port of Entry – Robert Rauschenberg

Hamm's shaken and disjointed interiority can be likened to the work *Port of Entry* (1999) by the American-born artist Robert Rauschenberg. The eclecticism of the work, due to the distorted use of photographs and seemingly incompatible

techniques, such as superimposing media photographs with digital technology or simple ink in a collage version, gives it a encrypted structure. Art critic Richard Lacayo says: "every time you see anyone doing anything that isn't supposed to be art—and calling it art—Rauschenberg is there" (in Sterrett and Roberts, 2009). The vitality and theatricality of Hamm's character come from the same kind of paradoxical vibe. The desire to short-circuit the narrative brings new meaning and becomes in itself a tool.

Samuel Beckett's anti-mimetic theatre is a universe lived in the minds and souls of the characters. A dilated image of the author's own consciousness. Philosophical speculations on the scale of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism can be glimpsed in Hamm's actions. One example is the action of groping the walls and the realisation that "Beyond is the... other hell" (Beckett, 2000, p. 45) which may refer to the line in Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* "Hell is other people" (Sartre, 2007, p. 142). This new figurative stage of Samuel Beckett's dramatic writing is translated in theatrical key by the author's lack of identification with his characters. Beckett has the profound dimension of the work born on the plane of his imagination, but visually translated in an extremely concrete and purged way in form.

There is something unsettling in this Beckettian projection of an art of non-expression. And at the same time something revealing about Samuel Beckett's own intention as an artist. An artist condemned to expression like the existentialist man condemned to freedom. An artist incapable of expressing himself, aware of this incapacity and who, in endless monologues, does nothing but express. Beckett's literature is such an expression of the inability to express. (Balotă, 1971, p. 497)

In conclusion, perhaps what neo-dada and pop-art culture, through visual artists such as Jasper Johns, Dmitri Vrubel, Claes Oldenburg, Arman or Robert Rauschenberg, manages to bring back to the present is a glimpse of the absurd universe of Beckettian theatre. The mortification of the present event by the endless continuum becomes unbearable. Yet it manages to move forward. The end of the play could have ended with the first line or not... there's nothing to be done...

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