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Beckett's Power-Full Signifiers: the Semiotics of Power in Beckett's Catastrophe

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Abstract:

This article seeks to conduct a semiotic enquiry into the problematic issue of power in relation to aesthetic representation by demonstrating that Samuel Beckett's Catastrophe is a play that deals with the complexity of [re]presenting power rather than the representation of power per se. While a full discussion of the question of power as historically represented in theatre would eventually correspond to an ample investigation whose limits are unpredictable, the focus in this discussion is placed on how dramatic signs, verbal and non-verbal, are used to present an image of power as a phenomenon whose contours can never be fully or conclusively drawn. Accordingly, the article attempts to explain how power in Beckett's Catastrophe is shown circulating through a series of signifying practices of a stage director who seeks to impose his will and point of view in presenting the image of a catastrophe to the audience. These practices are analysed and interpreted primarily as signs pertaining to various sign-systems, including the linguistic, the kinetic and the proxemic. What this article will demonstrate is that the forms of domination, coercion and the desire to control others as well as the forms of solidarity and resistance displayed through verbal, kinetic and proxemic action in Beckett's Catastrophe are cultural signifiers, involving communicative, linguistic as well as pragmatic aspects and testifying to the intricacy of representing power and its complicated mechanisms.

Key words: Beckett; drama; semiotics; power; sign(s); modality

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Introduction:

The present article mainly develops the problematic representation of power in Beckett's Catastrophe from a semiotic point of view. Semiotics is defined by Thomas Sebeok as 'both a science, with its own corpus of findings and theories, and a technique for studying anything that produces signs' (Sebeok, 1994: 5). It is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that involves countless terms and concepts. However, for methodological reasons, we shall use only those terms that pertain directly to the discussion, namely verbal signs (linguistic signs and their semantic as well as pragmatic effects) and non-verbal signs, including: kinetic signs standing for body movements, proxemic signs standing for the use and manipulation of space, as well as stages props or objects as signs in their own right. Through systematic exploration of these signs in relation to power, the article seeks to shed light on the power of discursive and non-discursive expressions as they are manifested or used by the powerful subjects and internalised, complied with or resisted by the powerless subjects. Here, it is essential to remember that power is ubiquitous and that any discussion of its uses or manifestations entails a rigorous understanding of the context(s) in which it is used or manifested. Human communities have always sought to understand the phenomenon of power in relation to its origins, forms of revelation, practice, perpetuation and negotiation as well as its ways of representation in everyday life, in individual/collective consciousness, in cultural expression as a whole and in the field of art in particular. In theatre, for instance, power has been a leitmotif in a plethora of dramatic works starting from Greek theatre up to the present-day stage.

However, in Beckett's dramatic world, specifically in Catastrophe, power has a special status in the sense that it is shown circulating rather than static, a special mode of representation insofar as its loci are shifting rather than stationary and a special type of expression in the sense that it is articulated through verbal and non-verbal signs. In Catastrophe, the issue of power and its problematic [re] presentation through theatrical signs – verbal and non-verbal – constitute a major challenge the actors and their audience have to contend with.

Far from being a mere political piece, the play engages with the complexity of representing power as a locus of multiple signifying practices and with the intricacies of defining its manifestations in the process of producing an image of a catastrophe to an audience. All the play's theatrical signs are made to orbit around the issues of authority, coercion, discipline, compulsion, reification, compliance with power and potential resistance to it. Such an orbiting, however,

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is orchestrated by a typical Beckettian worldview. This view, significant as it is for how power in Catastrophe may be construed, becomes even more crucial as we consider the tactful strategies Beckett uses in his play to make the theatrical sign polyfunctional, pluri-significant and dynamic.

Rather than condemning the play's verbal and non-verbal signs to interpretive closure by isolating their political implications as the sole focus of study, this discussion will attempt to liberate their signifying potential by adopting a focused analysis that is informed by a number of theoretical insights, rather than full-fledged theories. We shall use Baudrillard's concept of the sign's exchange value, which is defined as the value accorded to a sign (e.g. an object) owing to the social status it imparts to its owner rather than to its utility or use value (Baudrillard, 1981:65), to shed light on the social significance of stage objects/props in the play. We shall also use some of Gunther Kress's and Robert Hodge's reflections on the concept of modality and their definition of the term as the 'site of the working out' of 'ideological systems' (Kress and Hodge, 1988: 123), to account for the link between the different modes of verbial expression and the manifestations of power in Catastrophe; as well as Edward Hall's concept of proxemics and social distance to explain the link between the problematic [re]presentation of power and the characters' use of space in the play.

Significance of the Study:

This reading of Catastrophe is significant in at least two ways. First, by adopting a semiotic rather than a strictly or exclusively political perspective, it methodologically deviates from the mainstream reception of the play as a political magnum opus whose preoccupation with the notion of power has made a number of politically-oriented methods of criticism converge upon it.

Although the play has been transformed into a palimpsest by countless critics over more than three decades, it has never been approached from a semiotic perspective as the review of the literature will explain in the next section. The present discussion fills this gap by analyzing the characters' verbal and non-verbal actions as well as their costumes and the stage objects they manipulate as signs that relate variably to the notion of power. It is therefore of special interest to readers who are concerned with the application of semiotics to the study of drama as well as those who are concerned with further elucidation of the sociohistorical dimensions of Beckett's theatre.

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Second, as it deviates from the strictly-political reading of Catastrophe, this discussion places a special emphasis on the complexity of representing power as a nexus of relations and implications rather than the representation of power as the legitimized ability to control other people's behaviour in the way politicians, decision-makers and institutions habitually do. By studying the intricacy of representing power from a semiotic point of view, this discussion can be considered as a contribution to the significant critical labour that has been spent on the play ever since it appeared in 1981.

There are a number of questions that this article seeks to answer. These questions are: (1) in what way does Beckett's Catastrophe lend itself to semiotic analysis? (2) What a strategic role do stage objects, as signs, play in sketching the image of power presented to the audience? (3) How do the verbal modalities employed by characters as well as the kinetic and proxemic activities they engage in contribute to the dramatization of the complexity of the power exercise and the phenomena associated with it?

Summary of the Play:

In Catastrophe, Beckett describes the process of power, identification, judgement, and attitudinal conflicts that pervade the artistic operation of presenting the image of a catastrophe to an audience. The play involves three characters: a Director, an Assistant and a Protagonist. During the play, both the Protagonist and the female Assistant are simultaneously subjected to the authoritative and coercive commands of the Director. The Protagonist (P), as the stage directions specify, stands 'on a block 18 inches high'; he wears a 'black wide-brimmed hat' and 'a black dressing-gown to ankles', his head is bowed throughout, his hands are in his pockets, and his feet are bare.

As the play opens, we understand that the Assistant (A) has dressed the protagonist according to her own understanding of how the image of a catastrophe should look like and that the Director (D) is trying to understand the reasons for her choices of costume and appearance. Yet, as the play proceeds, and the disparity of opinion between A and D becomes more pronounced, the impact of power relations becomes rather diaphanous and the conflict of interpretation regarding the various aesthetic, psychological, and social meanings that P is supposed to embody becomes the catalyst by means of which the coercive facets of power are revealed. The Protagonist, as we have explained above, is not allowed to make

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any response; he is simply expected to endure the suffering, bear the comments and yield to the manipulations of the dictator director. However, at the end of the play, P raises his head in protest, and by so doing he not only undermines the image of escalating power the audience have constructed during the simulated rehearsal, but also questions the values of control, coercion and absolutism inherent in the concept of power itself. No matter how ambiguous and mystifying such an act of resistance might be, it demonstrates clearly that the submission to power does not preclude the possibility of resistance to it and that power often creates resistance as it attempts to contain it.

Review of the Literature:

This review concerns only the critical reception of Catastrophe. Other comments on the literature with respect to the socio-historical concerns of Beckett will be included in the following section on the pertinence of the question of power to Beckett's dramatic works.

Catastrophe was written in 1981 and was dedicated to Vaclav Havel who was imprisoned by Czech authorities for his subversive political views.(1) A quick review of the literature shows that most of the readings of Catastrophe have tended to converge rather than diverge. As mentioned above, the shared focus of those readings has been the concern with the political overtones of the play and the centrality of the issues of power, power relations and the resistance to power. Antoni Libera's 'Beckett's Catastrophe' (1985), for instance, has included a thorough examination of the play's political contents in relation to the original Greek sense of the title and to the notion of tragedy as denouement. Shannon Jackson's 'Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett's Catastrophe' (1992) has placed a special emphasis on the 'interplay of power and authority' in the internal performance process of theatricality and interpreted the play as 'a commentary on power relations, linking those which operate in the theatrical arena with those exerted in the political arena'.

Michael Guest's 'Act of Creation in Beckett's Catastrophe' (1995) recognized 'the play's social politics' but has gone a step further by emphasizing the act of aesthetic creation itself and demonstrating that the play could be understood as a 'metaphor' in which 'tragic catastrophe' coincides with 'miraculous creation', whereas Sandra

(1) "Vaclav Havel." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Encyclopedia.com. 16 May. 2017<http://www.encyclopedia.com>.

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Wynands's 'Visuality and Iconicity in Samuel Beckett's Catastrophe' (2005) has sought to demonstrate that the play 'speaks out against the exploitation of human beings by their fellow humans in institutionalized contexts that disguise and legitimize exploitation'.

Jim Hansen's 'Samuel Beckett's Catastrophe and the Theater of Pure Means' (2008) has proposed to read the play alongside 're-theorized conceptions of the political and the theatrical' and has tried to prove that its staging of theatricality draws attention to 'the failings and omissions of modern notions of the political itself'.

More recent studies of Catastrophe are included as chapters or analytical comments in full-length books on Beckett, such as: Charles A. Carpenter's The Dramatic works of Samuel Beckett (2011), Katherine Weiss's The Plays of Samuel Beckett (2013), James Knowlson's Damned to Fame: the life of Samuel Beckett (2014), and others.

Despite the methodological and analytical depth of most of the studies of Catastrophe, no research has been conducted on the semiotic richness of the play and the significance of stage props, as semiotic resources, as well as the type of verbal modalities used by the characters and their proxemic activities. It is precisely this gap that the present article proposes to fill by adopting a theoretical model of semiotic analysis based on close interpretation of verbal and non-verbal signs as they interact to dramatize/problematize the pivotal issue of power. The following section will include further remarks on this issue and on the relevant literature produced in this regard.

The Pertinence of the Question of Power to Beckett:

It is true that an important share of Beckett's drama is concerned with nothingness, but this 'nothingness', as we come to recognise it in the playwright's works, is by no means analogous to absolute ontological nonbeing where nothing means anything at all. As Sean Kennedy (2010) puts it, 'It is not that the drive towards negation is not there. It is just that it is not absolute.' [(1)]It is negation where 'nothing to express' means more than what it is supposed 'not to express', one where the signified of 'nothingness' transcends its own signifier and imposes existence within

(1) See Sean Kennedy, ed. 2010. *Beckett and Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 11.

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non-existence. To put it more simply, if one seeks to demystify the Beckettian version of nothingness, one has to understand it, not in the reductionist sense of sheer negativity or non-refrentiality, but rather in the hermeneutic sense of gap-filling, in which case the reader/audience is prompted to assign various meanings to the signifiers of lack, absence and ontological dislocation we encounter in a number of Beckett' dramatic works.

It is, beyond any doubt, nothingness as disclosure and exposure of ontological inconsistencies, of alienating senses of being and nonbeing, identity and non-identity, determination and indifference, as well as coercion and obedience. It is nothingness where stage figures struggle to 'express' despite their being dispossessed of the power to express, the power to decide and the power to breach an imposed order, as in the case of the Assistant and Protagonist in Catastrophe.

For some critics of the 1980s and early 1990s who found in the Beckettian text a fertile ground for deconstructionist analysis, Beckett was impetuously classified as reductionist, minimalist and subversive of logocentrism. However, this kind of taxonomy not only obliterates the rich variety of concerns his dramatic and prose works are replete with, but also overlooks his preoccupation with socio-historical concerns that relate to identity, class, gender, commodity fetishism, power representation, and politics in different ways.

Yet, despite the above-stated critical propensity, studies that have brought into focus the presence of sociohistorical concerns in Beckett are tenable enough to furnish the ground for subsequent interpretations along those lines. Peter Gidal's seminal discussions of the 'subject in history', 'against political optimism', and 'aesthetic politics' in his book Understanding Beckett (1986), as well as Stephen Watt's elaborate analysis of Beckett's subjects and dramatic situations 'by way of Baudrillard' (1987) were among the early writings showing that the categorization of Beckett's texts as ahistorical and anti-humanist was not realistically founded.

Gradually, and as deconstructionist criticism and its derivatives went on losing ground during the 1990s and the beginning of the third millennium, the interest in history, politics, power and ideology came back again to the surface. This went hand in hand with the revival of interest in reading Beckett in contexts other than those governed by the poststructuralist paradigms of indeterminacy, decentredness, deferral and non-historicity. Such contexts included an informed focus on Beckett's pertinence to the questions of ethics, politics, history, ideology and power, and a shift to the historical and cultural grounding

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of his works, as reflected in a number of studies by prominent scholars of Beckett. Among those studies are: Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political by Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney (2001), the 2005 issue of the journal Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui entitled Historicising Beckett/Issues of Performance, Beckett and Ireland by Sean Kennedy, ed., (2010), Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937 by Mark Nixon (2011) and others.

It has to be noted, here, that the above-listed works could not have been produced with such an insightful depth unless there had been responsive grounds in the author's writings that speak into the space of the ramified avenues of socio-historical concerns. As we reflect back on the earliest plays of Beckett, we become aware of the strong implications of those concerns in relation to identity, power, class and gender in Waiting for Godot, which was performed on many occasions in a political context, as well as in Happy Days and Endgame which dramatised the impact of confinement and surveillance - where the structures of power are located - on the human subject. The ontological aporia of Vladimir and Estragon, their epistemological confusion and disorientation in time and space can be, to a large extent, attributed to their being dispossessed of social role and to the constant feeling of defeat they experience while waiting for their hypothetical master Godot.

Just as the dispossession of social role leads to the loss of social identity, the total deprivation of physical action in the Second Act of Happy Days leads to the dispossession of the phenomenological self and reduces the female protagonist to a reified being who has to endure not only the objectifying gaze of an external observer, but also the subjugating control of an internalised power. In fact, Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days are among the dramatic works where Beckett explores the alienation of the human subject and his phenomenological estrangement vis-à-vis his own subjectivity and the social world as a result of the loss of belonging to a distinct social class, or as a result of a 'self-conscious internalization' of power.

Victoria Swanson explains the process of internalizing power in Endgame as follows:

> In Beckett's cosmos, subjectivity is, in itself, subjugation as self-consciousness becomes its own worst enemy through its internalization of power. For instance, in Endgame, Clov epitomises

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> the internalization of power as he allows himself to be both subjectified and subjugated by Hamm. (1)

In other shorter plays, the playwright places emphasis on the question of power and the various models of surveillance and interrogation associated with it. Rough for Radio II, which is a performance in a radio broadcasting studio, for instance, deals with the process of interrogation – as a typical exercise of power – and with the power relations governing the institutional hierarchy within which that process is conducted. Fox (the protagonist) is provoked into speech through a process of inquisitional torture led by Animator (the producer), a female Stenographer and a male assistant (Dick) who occasionally whips Fox to force him to confess what he seems to be hiding, a scene that reminds us very much of the scenes of torture in psychiatry hospitals where the powerless is subjected to the persecution of the powerful and is often punished to death.

A similar process of subjection occurs in Rough for Theatre II where the speechless victim Croker (C) is made to endure the torturous procedure of the investigation conducted by Bertrand (A) and Morvan (B) about his personality, character and past life. However, despite the apparent authority of the investigators and their 'institutional' supremacy over their victim, the latter manages to decide on his own will and jumps out of the window in an act of resistance to the control of oppressive others.

Such an act of resistance, which is subversive of the very essence of power and the coercive habits associated with it, becomes once more a focal scene in Catastrophe where Beckett deals with power in its relationship to representation (McMullan, 1993) and with the power relations inherent in the act of looking, or as Michel Foucault put it, in the apparatus of surveillance 'in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied, clearly visible' (as cited in McMullan, 1993). (2)

As we have hinted at earlier, we will try in the forthcoming analyses to bring into surface those subtextual meanings that lie beneath the play and that pertain to the

(1) See Victoria Swanson. 2011. In 'Confining, Incapacitating, and Partitioning the Body: Carcerality and Surveillance in Samuel Beckett's Endgame, Happy Days, and Play' in Miranda 4. Retrieved from http://www.readcube.com/articles/10.4000/miranda.1872

(2) Anna McMullan. *Theatre on Trial.* New York and London: Routledge, p. 27.

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question of power and its representation, using a semiotic approach which takes into consideration not only the playtext as a locus of verbal signification, but also the potential of staged realization as a locus of verbal and non-verbal signification.

Method, Context and Commodity:

Before taking issue with the fundamental avenues of socio-historical inquiry that Catastrophe so plainly opens, it is essential to clarify the theoretical position adopted in this discussion and the framework within which it is conducted. As stated in the introduction, this discussion does not have any epistemological commitment to any intellectual or philosophical standpoint. It rather uses close textual analysis as a principal method of enquiry and uses the insights of theoreticians only to the extent that their ruminations are closely relevant to the discussion.

The choice of Baudrillard's discussions of the questions of commodity, need and consumption in relation to ideology and power to conduct a thorough examination of stage objects in the play is attributed to two reasons. The first is that Baudrillard's seminal work For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1981) remains an illuminating resource and a rich theoretical reserve for any investigation that seeks to meticulously draw on the socio-economic significance of objects, as signs, compared to other available semiotic studies of objects such as: The Socialness of Things (Riggins, ed.,1995), What Objects Mean: an Introduction to Material Culture (Berger 2009), The Objects of affection: Semiotics and Consumer Culture (Berger 2010) and others. The second is that Baudrillard's belief that capitalist societies are driven by consumption rather than production, his critique of the Marxist concept of use-value and most notably his elaborate analysis of the sign exchange value of objects seem to be especially convenient for our analysis of objects in Beckett's play on the basis of their customized signification rather than utility or use value. Here, one should note that Baudrillard's postmodernist notions of hyperreality and simulation are not really at variance with the play's fundamental concern with the simulation of power and with the difficulty of drawing a borderline between the image of a catastrophe presented to the audience and its possible but uncertain referent in the real world. Moreover, his definition of power in terms of desire in Forget Foucault (1987) and the systematic critique he addresses to the ideologies of dominant power(s) in his book The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays (2002) are clearly more humanist than anti-humanist.

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The same thing holds for the choice of Kress' and Hodge's discussion of the semiotics of power, solidarity and modality. Although both writers continued to publish on different social-semiotic subjects such as Hodge's Social Fuzziology (2002) and Kress's latest book Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication (2010), their inaugural work Social Semiotics (1988) is methodologically more relevant to our study of Beckett's Catastrophe insofar as it includes a focused discussion of power, ideology and solidarity, as social-semiotic phenomena, in relation to verbal modality.

It has been previously pointed out that Beckett's dramatic works, extending from Waiting for Godot to What Where, are replete with scenes where agonising individuals have serious ontological problems with objects. In Catastrophe, objects, including props and costume, are likewise reduced to a minimum. the few stage objects we can see are the Director's armchair, cigar and 'fur toque', the Assistant's pencil and notepad as well as the plinth on which the Protagonist stands and the hat that covers his face. At first glance, these objects look quite normal and predictable in a typical scene where a stage director makes remarks and an assistant takes notes. Yet, when they are associated with the actors' social positions, kinetic activities and dialogic exchanges, they acquire further symbolic meaning that transcends their utility or use value.

The 'fur toque' the Director wears does not communicate the same social message as the 'wide-brimmed' hat the Protagonist wears. The Director's cigar which habitually stands for material prosperity and authority points to his superior status compared to his submissive subjects and obliquely epitomises his coercive habits vis-à-vis his companions. The Protagonist's hat, on the other hand, loses its conventional import as an indexical sign of achievement and authority, and becomes, instead, a typical instrument of camouflage, obliterating the Protagonist's face and resisting any potential identification with him. The Director asks: 'why the hat?' the Assistant so plainly answers: 'To help hide the face.'

With respect to the Assistant's place within the sphere of commodity ownership, the only few objects she is allowed to manipulate are the pencil and the notepad: 'She takes out a pad, takes pencil, notes'. In contrast to the Director's armchair, as a sign of sovereignty, judgement and command, and cigar, as a sign of material affluence, the Assistant's pencil and notepad markedly typify her role as a compliant executor of orders who has intuitively 'internalised' the lesson of power and has neither the right to discuss options nor the privilege to change things at her own will. The Assistant only takes notes and executes orders: D: 'Needs whitening!'

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/ A: 'I make a note' [She takes out pad, takes pencil, notes.] Whiten cranium.' Besides, the Assistant's reply to the Director's question: 'Why the plinth?' is 'To let the stalls see the feet.'

Viewed from the perspective of the transvaluation of utility, the plinth relegates its preliminary function as a base on which the statute-like Protagonist stands and becomes a special apparatus helping in the exposure of his flesh, in the reinforcement of surveillance and in the revelation of his nudity to the audience. Nudity is indeed the Director's obsession: the more the image of the hero approximates to nudity, the more it is successful. The Director asks the Assistant to bow the Protagonist's head further as a sign of utter obedience, and as she begins to execute his command he suddenly shouts: 'Stop...Fine. It's coming. [Pause.] Could do with more nudity.'

Strikingly significant, objects in Catastrophe are so carefully itemised, so adequately matched with their users that their reception within the usual signifier-signified frame of reference would seem perfunctory and would strip them of their oblique allusions to the notions of need, commodity fetishism and consumption. Objects like the hat, the chair, the cigar, the pencil, the plinth and the pad assume the dual role of acting as functional simulacra (obliterating all sense of practical utility) and at the same time, at a deeper level, as social discriminants bound up with the relations of difference or contradiction that are themselves subversive of this utility.

Particularly significant in this context is the distinction Jean Baudrillard (1981) makes between four types of logic in terms of which an object may be characterised: the logic of utility (functional logic), the logic of the market (economic logic of exchange value), the logic of the gift (logic of symbolic exchange) and finally the logic of status (the logic of sign value). For Baudrillard, the more we approach the last category, i.e. the logic of significations, the more the object becomes opaque/ intransitive and transforms itself into a veritable object of consumption. 'This object', as observes Baudrillard:

> does not assume meaning either in a symbolic relation with the subject (object) or in an operational relation to the world (object-as-implement):it finds its meanings with other objects, in difference, according to a hierarchical code of significations. This alone, at the risk of the worst confusion, defines the object of consumption.

(Baurillard, 1981, p. 64)

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In another instance he says:

> The sign object is neither given nor exchanged: it is appropriated, withheld and manipulated by individual subjects as a sign; that is, as coded difference. Here lies the object of consumption. And it is always of and from a reified, abolished social relationship that is 'signified' in a code.

(ibid., p. 65)

Beckett's pertinence to the theoretical preoccupations embodied in Baudrillard's approach to the object of consumption is most readily apparent in his thematization of the human body in Catastrophe as an object of artistic creation that is used and consumed in a context of differences, contradictions and conflicting judgements. In addition to the previous analysis of objects in terms of the transvaluation of utility, which is in turn grounded in a logic of coded difference, the Protagonist's body, being motionless and speechless throughout the play, may be seen as an 'object' or rather 'an image' whose interpretation can quite accessibly be carried out in the light of a theory of transvaluation of the 'signified'. The Protagonist's body, under the coercive practices of the Director, ceases to be a 'human' signified; it loses its original status as a representation of MAN and becomes a multi-layered signifier embodying the various meanings of subjection, powerlessness, opacity and vulnerability recommended by the Director.

Indeed, most of the Director's comments are indexical signs, to use Peirce's words, pointing to his fetishist and perpetual desire to possess the Protagonist's body and eliminate all his human attributes. Typically suppressive as it is, such a practice reminds the audience of the systems of physical torture that oppressive political regimes often subject their victims to when they engage in or show signs of resistance to the established order. Markedly relevant is the analogy Shannon Jackson (1992) draws between the formerly exposed systems of punishment of the condemned body and Beckett's revelatory staging of the corporeal punishment of P under the gaze of the audience:

> In an age which has worked progressively "to hide the body of the condemned man", shifting the site of execution and torture from public arenas to private chambers, diluting its methods in an attempt to discipline "at a distance," Beckett reminds us of the materiality of the figure who endures it all. A performance of Catastrophe, in fact,

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> restores these systems of punishment, once deprived of their visible display, to their historically spectacular condition; the condemned body, once again an object of sight, reminds its spectators of its fleshly existence.(1)

The Director's comments are also made obvious by virtue of their contrast with the Assistant's warnings which anticipate the Protagonist's potential for resistance:

A: Like that cranium?

D: Needs whitening.

D: There's a trace of face.

A: I make a note.

A: Unless he clenches his fists.

D: He mustn't.

A: Sure he won't utter?

D: Not a squeak...

A: I make a note. [She takes out a pad, takes pencil, notes.]

A: [Timidly.] What if he were to...were to...raise his head...an instant...show his face...just an instant.

D: For God's sake! What next? Raise his head? Where do you think we are? In Patagonia? Raise his head? For God's sake! [Pause.] Good. There's our catastrophe. In the bag. Once more and I'm off.

As can be seen from this text, the Assistant's relentless effort to restore to the Protagonist his human dignity and to save him from the oppressive commands and manipulations of the Director is to a great extent analogous to the idealism or 'transcendental humanism', in Baudrillard's words, inherent in the attempt 'to rescue the signified (referent) from the terrorism of the signifier'.

(1) See Shannon Jackson. 1992. 'Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett's Catastrophe' in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Vol. VI, No. 2: Spring, p. 25.

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In fact, as the Director consumes the Protagonist's body, he consumes the social code of private ownership which grants him the right to exercise power and to reproduce that practice over and over again. The Director considers the Protagonist his own property and the Assistant his means of access to that property. This leads to the inference that both the Assistant and the Protagonist are simultaneous victims of the Director's misused authority, and in consequence, carries our discussion further to a systematic exploration of characters and their speech modalities in relation to the notions of common destiny and solidarity.

Character Analysis, Modality and Proxemics:

In his dramatization of the human body as an 'object of consumption' in Catastrophe, Beckett made of the questions of discipline, power and solidarity the crux of his attention. As a matter of fact, the characters' attitudes towards one another, their conceptions of aesthetic representation, the language they use and the proxemic relations in which they are involved (e.g. their closeness to or distance from each other), are all structured on the power relations that determine their behaviours both verbally and non-verbally. The antithetical relationship between power and solidarity, for instance, is clearly visible through the Director's and Assistant's conflicting attitudes towards the Protagonist. While the Director insists that the Protagonist must keep his head bowed, must not speak and must not elicit any movement to typify the image of submission he desires, the Assistant constantly announces the possibility of the subject's resistance and revolt.

Moreover, in her handling of the Protagonist, the Assistant is continuously aware of the fact that he is a human being before he could be an object of art. She perceives him as a totality and ascribes to him all those attributes that can be properly described as 'human':

A: Unless he clenches his fists.

D: He mustn't.

A: He's shivering.

D: Bless his heart.

D: ...Once more and I'm off.

A: [To L.] Once more and he's off.

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The Director, on the other hand, perceives the Protagonist as an object: his sarcastic and ironical reply to the Assistant's emphatic remark 'He's shivering' reveals his indifference to 'human' emotions and reminds the audience of the stereotyped image of an oppressor whose self-centredness prevents him from feeling other people's pains. The Director insists that the speechless body should be examined and whitened part by part, a dismemberment that would help in the transformation of the human subject into an artistic material or object for consumption, judgment and exchange.

D: Get going! Get going! [A puts back the pad, goes to P, stands irresolute.]

Bare the neck. [A undoes the buttons, parts the flaps, steps back.] The legs.

The shins. [A advances, rolls up to below knee one trouser-leg, steps back.]

The other.[Same for other leg, steps back.] Higher. The knees. [A advances,

rolls up to above knees both trouser-legs, steps back.] And whiten.

A: I make a note. [She takes out pad, takes pencil, notes.] Whiten all flesh.

The Assistant's position in the social space occupied by power relations is less obvious than that of the Protagonist who occupies the lowest position in the represented hierarchy. On the one hand, she is forced to collaborate with the Director in subjecting the human body to discipline and control, in which case her ritualistic note-taking is concrete evidence of both her submission to the Director's will and her complicity in the exercise of power: 'I make a note. [She takes out pad, takes pencil, notes.] On the other hand, she identifies with the Protagonist and expresses her sympathetic consciousness of his suffering, which brings her into a closer fellowship with him and assigns to her the qualities of what Anna McMullan calls a 'fellow-victim'.

At the end of the play, this latent solidarity between the two victims is made manifest when the Protagonist enacts the Assistant's prophecies and raises his head to the audience in challenge: '[Pause. Distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies. Long pause. Fade out of light on face.]'

Clearly, then, Beckett does not wish to isolate his 'victims'; he rather metaphorically brings them into an undeclared alliance against their authoritarian 'adversary' who is one. His strategy is to make the circulation of power and the potential

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of solidarity as well as resistance the locus of action and signification. Beckett, also, makes of modality and proxemic relations in Catastrophe dramatic signifiers of social awareness and received tokens of power practices. In their book Social Semiotics (1988), Hodge and Kress define modality in terms of its correlation with the notions of power and solidarity:

> Difference of power and lack of solidarity may continue around other areas; hence the potent (and correct) identification of power and knowledge in semiotic systems of the kind we are dealing with. Modality is consequently one of the crucial indicators of political struggle. It is a central means of contestation, and the site of the working out, whether by negotiation or imposition, of ideological systems. It provides a crucial component of the complex process of the establishment of hegemonic systems, a hegemony established as much through the active participation of social agents as through sheer imposition of meaning by the more powerful on the less powerful participants. (p. 123)

Modality, the 'site' of 'ideological systems', is a characteristic trait of linguistic signification which has significant pragmatic effects in Catastrophe. Most of the Director's utterances are issued in the form of commands (deontic modality): 'Light / Get going / Lose that gown / And whiten / Down the head / Stop / Bare the neck / Blackout stage'. This linguistic manoeuvre, which is typical of the discourse of unequal power, suggests that the Director is using language not only as a 'commodity of the powerful', but also as a means by which he reinforces his authority over his subjects who have to receive language signifiers and their mode of enunciation as tokens of power. From a semiotic point of view, his emphatic remark 'mustn't' and his demands for information: 'Why the plinth?' / Why the gown? / Why hands in pockets? / How are they? / Is Luke around?' are indexical signs pointing to his coercive habits and to the sense of pleasure he sadistically derives from the submission of his subordinate 'victims'. They are also signs of the type of coercion that is usually associated with the interrogative style of police investigations where interrogated subjects are intimidated and provoked to speak.

The Assistant, however, is either a responder to commands or a provider of information. In both cases, she is in the service of a powerful master who incarnates power and its discursive signs in the most exemplary way. Even her interrogative statements 'Like the look of him?' and 'Like that cranium?' are never genuine questions; they are mere demands for consent and approval mixed with oblique

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warnings of an anticipated resistance.

Another salient feature of linguistic signs that merits attention in this regard is the Director's reluctance to use possessive or personal pronouns to refer to the Protagonist; he either uses definite articles to ironically express closeness or sometimes omits them completely. It could also be noted that this type of verbal strategy functions as a modality suggesting the Director's fetishist desire to dehumanise the Protagonist and to keep a social distance from him, a distance that would confine the powerless subject to a permanent space of subservience and subordination.

Keeping distance, which is a highly-suggestive semiotic expression, is physically enacted through the Director's proxemic relation to the 'subordinate' characters as well as thorough the Female Assistant's proxemic relations to the Protagonist. Both relations have strong implications of power and power relations as shall be explained in the following comments.

In his book The Hidden Dimension (1966), Edward Hall defines proxemics as follows: 'Proxemics is the term I have coined for the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture' (1966, p. 1). People belonging to different cultures or different social classes within the same culture have different approaches to space and different understandings of how it is used or occupied. Hall distinguishes between four types of distance in human handlings of space: intimate, personal, social and public (ibid., p. 78), all of which have meanings and implications beyond their physical or environmental attributes. The third type (social distance) is the one that concerns us here. Keeping a certain social distance from an interlocutor often has strong social implications. Social distance is meant to communicate messages about the social hierarchy and power relations involved in such a proxemic situation. It is also meant to prevent direct contact and to ensure a certain degree of personal security.

In Catastrophe, for instance, the Director's proxemic behavior is marked by an excessive care for social distance, which is habitually the case for most of those who hold positions of power. Throughout the whole play, the Director never approaches the Protagonist and never allows his assistant to get close to him except when he needs her to light his cigarette. His obsession with distance is in fact an obsession with separation and difference, a difference that grants him, or so he thinks, the privilege to dominate his subjects and to treat them as commodities rather than humans.

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At the beginning of the play, the Director is said to be seated 'in an armchair downstage audience left' and later on, he goes to the auditorium, sits 'in the front row of the stalls' and utters his commands from there. In both cases, the sitting posture signifies his critical attitude and casts him as a figure of judgement, authority and power. It is also a posture that allows for surveillance and manipulation which are both exercises of power and incarnations of the desire to control others. Here, one should note that the social meanings assigned to sitting depend on the context of the proxemic situation in which sitting takes place. While sitting in a classroom stands for learning, discipline and execution of instructions, sitting behind the bench of a court stands for authority and decision-making. The same thing holds true for the Director in Catastrophe, whose sitting at a social distance from his subordinates epitomizes his totalitarian character and his passion for domination.

At some point in the play, the Director goes to the stalls to take an extensive view of the scene. As he leaves, the Female Assistant advances to his chair and sits down, but she quickly rises to a standing position when the Director cries: 'I can't see the toes'. While this act implies that an inferior subject is not allowed to sit in a superior's chair and violate his/her private space, it suggests that subordinates may very well develop a latent desire to occupy the positions of their directors and exercise power, or enjoy it, just as it is exercised on them. It is also an act that alludes to the complicity of the Assistant, the vulnerability of her alleged solidarity with the Protagonist and the complexity of locating the loci of power. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, this ambivalent attitude or behaviour of the Assistant may be interpreted as a psychological reaction to the frustrating commands of the Director and as a defence strategy she uses to overcome the feeling of inferiority she experiences.

Compared to the Director's proxemic relations to his subjects, the Assistant's proxemic activities are manifestly divergent. Most of her handling of space is characterized by a reduction of distance. On several occasions she gets close to the Protagonist to manipulate his body and adjust his costume and appearance. She also gets close to the Director when he allows her to, but such a reduction of social distance into personal distance is less construed as a privilege or sudden ascension in social hierarchy than as perpetuation of her subservience and her social status as a subordinate. In fact, the discussion of proxemic relations in Catastrophe can be carried even further, given the social, cultural and psychological implications proxemics has in the field of theatrical performance. But this would be the subject matter of another enquiry that would treat every single use of space in the play as

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a signifier in its own right and would push the limits of proxemic expression to the far edge of possibility.

Conclusion:

The advantage of reading Beckett in the light of such a semiotic approach to the notion of power and the intricacy of its representation is that it adds credibility to the socio-historical perspective that is gaining more and more ground in Beckett's studies. It also opens up further avenues of investigation into a better understanding of how power circulates by means of signs and how the interpretation of those signs varies according to the position one occupies within the institutional apparatus of power. The semiotic approach to the power-model presented in Catastrophe has attempted to focus on: the way power is diffused through various sign systems rather than concentrated, the way it is constituted – through discursive and kinetic practices – rather than owned, as well as the way it is internalised or complied with rather than imposed. Such an approach has also attempted to demonstrate that the binary model of power presented in the play is not binary in the sense of strict irreversibility, but rather dynamic in the sense of mobility, where power is shown circulating among different agents, including the Director, the Assistant and the Audience, and where the potential of resistance, as incarnated in the final gesture of the Protagonist, is produced by the very system that seeks to eliminate/ contain it.

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دلالات بيكيت المُكْتَنَفة بالسلطة : سيميائية السلطة في مسرحية بيكيت (الكارثة)

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ملخص البحث:

يسعى هذا المقال إلى إجراء دراسة سيميائية لإشكالية السلطة في علاقتها بالفعل الجمالي من خلال إظهار أن مسرحية صموئيل بيكيت «الكارثة» تعالج مسألة صعوبة تمثيل السلطة عوضا عن تمثيل السلطة في حد ذاتها. وإذا كانت المناقشة المفصّلة لمسألة السلطة كما تناولها المسرح على مرّ الزمن تؤدي في النهاية إلى دراسة شاملة لا يمكن التنبؤ بحدودها ، فإننا سنحاول في هذا البحث التركيز على كيفية استخدام الكاتب للدلالات المسرحية ، اللفظية وغير اللفظية ، لتقديم صورة للسلطة كظاهرة لا يمكن رسم معالمها بشكل كامل أو قاطع. ومن هذا المنطلق سيحاول البحث شرح كيفية ظهور السلطة في مسرحية بيكيت «الكارثة» في شكل عمل تداولي عبر سلسلة من الأفعال الدلالية من قبل مخرج مسرحي يحاول فرض إرادته ووجهة نظره من خلال تقديم صورة «كارثة» إلى الجمهور. كما سيقوم البحث بتحليل وتفسير هذه الممارسات بالأساس على أنها علامات مرتبطة بأنظمة علامات مختلفة ، بما في ذلك العلامات اللغوية والجسدية والعلامات المتصلة بالمسافات المكانية بين الأفراد. وما سيحاول هذا المقال فعله هو إبراز أن أشكال الهيمنة والإكراه والرغبة في السيطرة على الآخرين وكذلك أشكال التضامن والمقاومة التي تظهر من خلال الفعل اللغوي والجسدي وحجم المسافة المكانية بين الأفراد في مسرحية بيكيت «الكارثة» هي دلالات ثقافية تشمل جوانب تواصلية ولغوية وتداولية تشير إلى صعوبة تجسيد السلطة وآلياتها المعقدة.

الكلمات الدالة: باكيت، الدراما، السيميائية، السلطة، العلامات، الشكلية.

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