
Samuel Beckett's Interaction with Popular Culture and the Reconstruction of Mass Perception

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the role of mechanical reproduction of art in reconstructing mass perception. According to Walter Benjamin, the worldwide accessibility of the canonical texts of great aesthetic value will definitely develop the critical understanding of the masses. Theodor Adorno, on the other hand, holds a critical view on the role of consumer culture in mass deception. He believes that people's excessive consumption of consumer products makes them an easy prey to the power structure of late capitalism. Now, my point is that Samuel Beckett's immersion in popular culture can be contextualised with his involvement in anti-Nazi activities during and after the Second World War in the 1940s and 50s. His direct involvement in mass media like radio and television has definitely projected the body of his work into a global space. With the help of technological innovation Beckett might intend to cross the spatio-temporal limitations of his work and to share his critical understanding with the world. Such a critical understanding helps the masses to perceive the internal structures of the society and to resist oppressive structures of the state. So, popular culture is a space where "high" and "low" art can freely interact with each other.

Keywords: Technology, Politicization, Consumer Culture, Political participation, Resistance.

Introduction: Samuel Beckett is one of the eminent modernist writers who have greatly contributed to the high modern as well as the popular forms of art and culture. His presence in popular art and the presence of popular culture in him are very prominent. Such a dualistic approach raises many questions like how far Beckett retains the balance between his aesthetic standards and the popular cultural demands. Questions may also arise about what are the socio-economic factors that have influenced Beckett to interact with popular culture? Beckett has recognised popular art to become a space where many cultural factors come in sharp conflict with each other. Besides, he also has recognised this platform as a space for cultural assimilation and transmission. Now the point is what do we mean by these popular forms of art? It includes everything that has been reproduced mechanically like the newspaper

magazines, radio programmes, TV shows, films, detective fiction, science fiction, graphic novels and the others. They serve economic purpose to the consumer society. They also serve the purpose of mass entertainment. It is true that technological innovations have become an inseparable part of contemporary consumer culture. With the help of technological innovation, the canonical arts that are embedded with high aesthetic appeal have crossed their spatio-temporal limitations and achieved global accessibility.

So far as the function of popular art in reconstructing mass perception is concerned, I require to mention here the Adorno-Benjamin dispute of the 1930s on the emancipatory potential of mass art. In his famous writing, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, written and revised between 1935 and 1939, Walter Benjamin states that technologized representation of popular art plays a dual role in the society. In the one hand, it shatters the “aura” or the ritualistic values of canonical art and makes it available to the masses. On the other hand, it serves to develop the critical understanding and political participation of the masses in resisting the oppressive structure of the society. This philosophy is debunked by Theodor Adorno in his book called *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) written in collaboration with Max Horkheimer. He considers the technologized representation of consumer culture as a negative political force which reincarnates the ideology of late capitalism. It engenders a habit of consuming depthless and ideologically indoctrinated images. Such a habit develops nothing but passive, unimaginative, non-creative, compliant beings. Their mystified quest for identity on the ground of thoughtless images as reproduced by technology restricts them to perceive the inner mechanism of the state. According to Adorno, technology deceives the mankind. Adorno and Benjamin believe that cultural life of a society played an important role in assisting mass manipulation and control. Through politicization of aesthetics the Nazi regime had established its political supremacy. According to Adorno, the “culture industry”, where people become an easy prey to consumer capitalism, is a trope for homogenization of society. Benjamin believes that aesthetics played a crucial role in bringing the Nazi regime into power. The Nazi had taken the help of aesthetics to influence the political understanding of the society. Hence, mass cultural events organised by the Nazi regime obtained a political overtone. So, it is clear that consumer culture is a powerful apparatus of mass mediation.

I wish to mention a book called *Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture* (2019), edited by Paul Stewart and David Pattie, which has depicted popular culture as an open space where cultural conflicts as well as cultural transmissions take place. The entire process is facilitated by the technologized reproduction of art. For instance, the two major TV channels of Britain – B.B.C. and I.T.V. – have juxtaposed the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett with mass entertaining programmes. Consequently, the broadcasters achieve extended cultural benefit from an association with Beckett. In turn, the works of Beckett achieve an extended social platform beyond the limitations of theatrical space. The consumer culture seems to be the economic base on which the mass media industry is situated. Many entertainment programmes in the television not only enhances the popularity of the channel but also receives sponsorship from various agencies. In that sense, mass media not only

provides worldwide platform to the “high art” but also serves economic purposes. In turn, the “high art” serves to enhance the cultural value of popular art forms. It also satisfies the compulsion of the broadcasters to develop critical understanding of the masses. By projecting the canonical texts of Beckett on a popular platform mass media not only makes it easily accessible to the common people but also gives them a scope to reconstruct their perceptions and critical understandings.

Paul Stewart and David Pattie in their introduction to the above mentioned book have stated clearly that Beckett himself takes initiative to enter into the popular medium. Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* has described that Beckett had written two plays namely, *All That Fall* (first broadcast on 13 January 1957) and *Embers* (28 October 1959), for the B.B.C.’s Third Programme. He wrote these plays under the influence of the distinguished radio producer Donald McWhinnie (Esslin 41). Stewart and Pattie further elaborate that Beckett had written two other unfinished radio texts namely, *Roughs for Radio 1&2* which were composed at roughly the same time. Martin Esslin has described in her book Beckett’s fascination for new mass media. Beckett was continued to write for radio putting especial emphasis on the combination of text and music. He wrote *Words and Music*, with a special contribution by the composer John Beckett, which was first broadcast by the B.B.C. His further contribution to radio was *Cascando* (written in French), with music by the Rumanian composer Marcel Mihalovici, had its first performance on the French radio on 13 October 1963. It was later broadcast in German from Stuttgart on 16 October 1963 and in English on the B.B.C.’s Third Programme on 28 October 1964 (Esslin 42). Esslin states that Beckett has also greatly contributed to television play. Beckett wrote the television play *Eh Joe* in 1965 and performed in Germany as well as on the B.B.C. (with Jack McGowran, one of Beckett’s favourite actors, in the lead).

Beckett’s engagement in the technologies of the popular culture is itself a part of the wider cultural shift in Britain, the US, and Western Europe. After the end of Second World War the economic base of the West was severely affected. It took a long time to recover. The consumer culture served a major contribution to the recovery of economic prosperity of the West. Stewart and Pattie state that a parallel increase in average wages and the availability of consumer goods and services had contributed to the economic growth of the West. During the 1950s and 1960s people had spent money on new technologies like television. They considered it as an integral part to their everyday household. Beckett’s cultural supremacy is coincided with the changing trends of what we call the culture industries. Besides, Beckett’s direct involvement in popular culture may be contextualised with his active involvement in anti-Nazi movements during and after the Second World War in the 1940s and 1950s. In many of his writings he has critically depicted the culture of anti-Semitic denunciation that flourished under Nazi occupation, the culture of pro-Nazi French militia, and anti-resistance surveillance. He intended to share his critical understanding with the world by the help of technological innovation and mass media. The Nazi regime was intended to politicise the aesthetic field and therefore, extended their totalitarian and homogenizing control over the masses. Such a shrewd politics could be resisted by using the same aesthetic field as a

positive force to develop the critical understanding of the masses with an easy access to the canonical texts of great intellectual appeal.

Paul Stewart and David Pattie in their volume have described how the distinction between “high” and “low” culture is blurred. One contributes to the other. One of the volume’s editors found a Beckett t-shirt, with a cartoon illustration of Beckett and a misquotation of *Godot* while lecturing at the Samuel Beckett Summer School. According to the standard aesthetics of the “high” culture it must be considered as the degradation of art. But such a perception might be changed if we look at the context/place of production of the degraded art. It was in the library shop of Trinity College, Dublin, the other side of which was famous for preserving the great canon of Beckett’s work (Stewart and Pattie *Pop Beckett* 12). The context here abolishes the distinction between “high” and “low” culture and makes one integral to the other. The question is how does the popular production of that t-shirt become integral to the high academic canon of Beckett? The library gift shop is undoubtedly a commercial agency that serves the economic requirements of the college. The huge economic demands of the academic work of the universities are partly served by the commercial agencies like the library gift shop and the others. So, artistic creation is commoditized here for the purpose of serving the academic funding. On terms of economic necessities, the barriers between art and consumer culture is blurred. Rather, it creates a space where one culture is interacting with the other. It creates an open field of cultural transmission between “high” and “low” culture.

According to Paul Stewart and David Pattie, a similar kind of cultural conflict as well as cultural assimilation took place in a programme called *In Our Time* on the B.B.C. Radio 4 in January 2019. The programme was meant to endorse the practice of critical thinking and analytical power of the viewer. The basic intention of the programme was to analyse historical moments, philosophies, concepts, or works of art with the experts in their respective field and correlate the discussion in our time. One such programme was taken place on Samuel Beckett. The panel of experts included three major Beckett scholars – Steven Connor, Laura Salisbury and Mark Nixon. It was hosted by Melvyn Bragg, a distinguished veteran arts broadcaster, both on radio and television (Stewart and Pattie *Pop Beckett* 13). While pursuing the discussion, being a host Bragg’s attention was to keep a semblance between the innovative references of the critical thinkers and the familiar perceptions of the viewer. The ultimate purpose of the programme was to popularise the canon of Beckett. If the discussion was completely overwhelmed by the critical innovative thoughts of the thinkers it might have lost mass acceptance. It might have lost its popularity. It must not go beyond the levels of understanding of the viewer. So, the host had to consciously change the dimension of discussion towards a direction that was familiar to the viewer. The B.B.C.’s principle objective with this programme was to develop the critical understanding of the viewer as well as popularise the canonical art. So, the standard of the programme must follow the capability and familiar understanding of the viewer. By following the course of discussion while Mark Nixon – editor of Beckett’s *German Diaries* – tried to outline Beckett’s social and political participations in anti-Nazi movements, Bragg

tried to change the discussion towards the apolitical and aesthetic sides of Beckett (Stewart and Pattie *Pop Beckett* 14). In that case the later theme was more popular to the former one. That is why the host redirected the line of discussion towards a more popular and familiar ground. According to Paul Stewart and David Pattie, Bragg wished to tie Beckett into a world which his audience would be familiar with. He tried to correlate the intellectual desires as well as popular perceptions of the audience. Again mass media or the popular art forms are used to project both cultural conflict and cultural transmission side by side.

Now I like to discuss how popular culture interacts with the canonical texts on broadcasting Samuel Beckett's drama. Jonathan Bignell in his paper called "Do You Really Enjoy the Modern Play? : Beckett on Commercial Television", published under the volume called *Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture* (2019) edited by Paul Stewart and David Pattie, gives a description of how television channels like B.B.C. and I.T.V. take initiative to broadcast Beckett's drama. As I have mentioned earlier that the relationship between Samuel Beckett and B.B.C. is very strong and long lasting. B.B.C is considered as the sole patron of broadcasting Beckett's work. It is true that extracts from Beckett's work also appeared on Independent Television, a commercially funded British television channel set up in 1955. It was solely funded by the consumer society that included many more consumer goods. The principle challenge of I.T.V. was to satisfy both - the masses by casting entertaining programmes and the consumer society by advertising saleable goods. Now the question is what makes I.T.V. to deal with canonical texts of modern era. According to Jonathan Bignell, it was the Pilkington Report (1962), an enquiry by the British Government on the performance of I.T.V. in the last five years (Stewart and Pattie *Pop Beckett* 66). The report of the enquiry marked the fact of I.T.V.'s ignorance to broadcasting programmes related to the development of critical understanding of the viewers. In order to upgrade the cultural and critical credentials of the channel, I.T.V. had started a series called *The Present Stage* in 1966, with two episodes about *Waiting for Godot* (Stewart and Pattie *Pop Beckett* 67). By shattering the conventional notions of theatre's integrity with London stage, I.T.V. had broadcast the drama of Beckett on a popular platform. Consequently, a worldwide accessibility of dramatic performance had broken down the limited space of the theatre hall where only a small number of British populations could see live performances due to unaffordability and a sense of social exclusion. Such limitations could be overcome by the help of mechanical reproduction of art. Now everybody, irrespective of class, caste, region and ethnicity, could experience theatre and participate in the habit of sharpening their critical understanding. In that way like B.B.C., I.T.V. also remained successful in nourishing the viewers' cultural horizon and deepening their knowledge. I.T.V.'s principle aim was to juxtapose critical understanding with mass entertainment on a popular platform. Here one more thing that I wish to mention is that the entire process of broadcasting was totally funded by the consumer society and the advertisement industry. So, again consumer culture offers an open platform where canonical art and popular art, intelligence and entertainment, "high" and "low" culture interact with each other.

Having closely observed the Adorno-Benjamin debate and the possibility of cultural assimilation with the advent of mass media we come to realise that the traditional notions of cultural hierarchy has lost its position in present day. The definitions of culture have changed. The rigid barriers of different cultures have lost. Now, culture becomes an open field where many forces may come to conflict or assimilate with each other. Beckett himself has abolished such cultural barriers by actively participating in the arena of popular culture which is directly related to the masses through print, television, film, music and radio. Adorno's criticism of the failure of consumer culture to develop critical perceptions of the masses may be reinterpreted in a new light. The concept of such a cultural assimilation could be a possible resistance against the Nazi attempts of domination through the politicization of aesthetics. Through the help of mass media people can get an easy access to critical texts or the canonical literature and therefore, develop their critical understanding. That heightened understanding would develop their political consciousness and help them to debunk the Nazi ideology. Benjamin also talks of such kind of political understanding of the masses through the help of mechanical reproduction of art. He believes that the technologies of reproduction not only transform culture but also the whole society. The combination of art and technology will finish the authoritative predominance of the bourgeois and facilitate the emancipation of society. Now, those high cultural texts may be easily transmissible through the new media technologies. In the above discussion we can perceive that Beckett has obtained a dual status. In the one hand, he represents the traditions of the Western canon and on the other hand, he becomes iconic in the sense that his writings are easily accessible to a wide range of audience through mass media. An obvious cultural transformation can clearly be visible in the cultural positioning of a writer like Beckett through his interventions with popular culture.

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