

“Psychodrama of the ordinary” in the works of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and David Lynch

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Theatre and film are the two most appealing visual mediums of artistic expression. Since their appeal is total, including all possible senses, the ultimate mental impact theatre and film produce is quite impressive for the audience in its visual as well as psychological dimensions. This, in turn, provides the representatives of the two genres with a very powerful tool in influencing and inspiring human subconsciousness.

Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and David Lynch are to be found within a group of the most psyche-oriented artists within the last decades. Unorthodox in their methods of transmitting their values to the audience, the artists set their works in an aura frequently classified by critics as bordering on the bizarre and subconscious. Their unconventional feel of the surrounding reality, combined with an unlimited imagination enable all three artists to reconstruct their audiences' perception of reality into their authorized view on it. It is also thanks to Beckettian, Pinterian and Lynchian constructions of personal metaphysics that the audience acquire a chance of being faced with an astounding familiarity between their private experiences and what is depicted on screen or stage. Such peculiar, yet overwhelming feeling of being exposed to a theatrical self-reflection results in releasing the contents of our subconsciousness, spurring imagination to reach beyond the material and the visible.

The same technique of delving into the human mind can be traced back to D. J. L. Moreno's psychodrama therapy. Psychodrama as an approach to therapy was introduced in the United States in 1925. Designed for a collective projection of the subconscious, psychodrama was a medical procedure used in treating mental illness, which consisted of communal reenactment of a given situation in order to understand one's *true* emotions. It was based on “the discovery of aspects of the subconscious, through spontaneous dramatic situations” (Moreno, 130). It defined the function of the role as a means to “enter the unconscious from the social world and bring shape and order into it” (130). The basic assumption of Moreno was that every individual is subjected to a role-playing model of existence on different levels of consciousness. According to him, the act is the beginning of every existence:

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The relationship of roles to the situations in which the individual operates (status) and the relation of role as significantly related to ego has been emphasized by myself. (...) Role is the unit of culture; ego and role are in continuous interaction (Moreno, 134).

Analogically, ego and role are one, and create a united organism. The theory also undertakes the enactment of personal life dramas with fellow patients taking on the roles of auxiliary egos, who, by recreating certain past situations, enable the patient to vocalize and correct their previous mistakes. The final effect of the therapy brings about the desired clarification on the part of the patient, producing an automatic catharsis and bringing back the lacking confidence, self-awareness and self-forgiveness for the mistakes of the past.

It (psychodrama) produces a healing effect – not in the spectator (secondary catharsis) but in the producer – actors who produce the drama and, at the same time, liberate themselves from it (139).

Moreno's idea of getting into the subconscious by means of conjoining several alter egos in the process of role playing reflects to a large extent the model of plot construction presented by Beckett, Pinter and Lynch. In all three cases, the artists pursue the same principle of the characters' multiple role playing. The characters reflect each other (Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*), reflect desires (Sarah in *The Lover*, Ruth in *The Homecoming*) or acquire numerous personalities losing their true identity (Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*). They all subject themselves to the judgmental perceptions of others, since they think they exist only when they are perceived. None of them feel free to act independently and speak their minds. They all look for the reflection of their genuine selves in the surroundings of "others." It is thanks to those "others" – communities (*Twin Peaks*), families (*The Homecoming*) or companions (*Waiting for Godot*) that they regain their lost identities and redefine themselves. The theme of rediscovering oneself in the artists' works is more often than never followed by a phase of liberation from all the unwanted artificial roles imposed on the characters due to circumstances. The mediums they use to support the motif of psychodrama in their works vary considerably. One of the most prevailing themes is by far the one that refers to their search for the truth and the establishment of moral standards, the prerequisite of exploring beneath the surface.

After 1970, with the post-structuralist theory, the debate on the Freudian concept of the "Uncanny" began. The original aim of this belief was to focus on another facet of aesthetics referring to less beautiful and positive emotions bringing our anxiety and unease to the surface. The German equivalent Freud chose to describe was referred to as "unheimlich", which directly translated means "unhomely". According to Freud: "*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained... secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud, 345). The English word "uncanny" was established by him as possibly the closest in meaning to "unheimlich", since it carries the same emotional attributes.

A basic definition of the uncanny is what is perceived when something supposedly familiar in fact appears strange and unfamiliar. Equally, the reverse can be an instance of the uncanny: when something unfamiliar strikes one as familiar (Buse, 33).

The notion of "uncanny" to a large extent reflects the subject matter of Beckett, Pinter and Lynch's works. It is in Beckett, where the emotions of mutual interdependence (*Endgame*), craving for company in sharing the pain of living (*Waiting for Godot*) or impossibility of self-evaluation (*Krapp's Last Tape*) appear to the audience as both strange and familiar. Voyeurism, role playing, physical violence or self-inflicted guilt are those of Lynchian motifs every viewer can identify with. We look at what we are and we read about events we have witnessed before. The seemingly unfamiliar set up leads to familiar and experienced aspects of life. Yet, the truth of the matter lies beneath the surface of the text, regardless of it being delivered to the screen or on paper. Pinter provides an ideal example of this in *The Homecoming*:

Although *The Homecoming* is not on the surface 'about' Oedipal desire or neurosis, it is quite manifestly about the *heimlich*. The title of the play alerts us to this fact, and like the titles of many of Pinter's earlier plays – *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Basement*, *Tea Party* – it carries connotations of intimate physical spaces or cosy familiar events (Buse, 37).

The uncanny, sickly erotic and divided character of the family comes to the surface, once more uncovering the dark side of human nature in all its rawness and textual explicitness. The misleading, heimlich titles of the plays have their accurate counterparts in Lynch's *Twin Peaks* or *Blue Velvet*, where the soothingly sounding titles cover literally (*Blue Velvet*) and figuratively (*Twin Peaks*) the source of corruption.

Lynch's films have many levels, and all take a look below the surface of what is depicted as normal, to explore the hidden darkness. The societies in his films, from Victorian London to Twin Peaks, appear superficially wholesome but all have some form of danger within. In many ways, this sickness beneath the surface defines the narrative drive in all of his works (Le Blanc, 9).

Both *heimlich* and *unheimlich* have an equal impact on the artists in their search for the truth that lies beneath. Both terms are also crucial in defining the surrounding and the outside environment their characters are set in as the artists' first stage towards introducing audiences to their authorized concept of psychodrama. The following phase of the process is built up and influenced by diverse mediums such as: textual structure of the works (including undertones, repetitions and omissions), setting or development of alter egos. Before all of those, however, another element of the psychodrama background has to be laid out. This element is classed as menace, which in the artists' instance can be analysed on two separate levels: as the menace of the ordinary and the menace of language.

Menace of the ordinary widely used by the artists in film and plays as a technique of establishing the right tempo, discourse and atmosphere of the story derives from the fickleness of genres. Contrary to logic, it is frequently during the tragedies when we laugh and we shed tears following the comedies. What makes us laugh and cry may have its origin on two emotionally opposite poles, yet having one common background: the sensation of unease and mental isolation.

Tragedy, rising from an excess of energy, in spite of the tears, releases a certain pleasure. Comedy, on the other hand, rising from an emotional evasion, in spite of the laughter, releases a certain melancholy. For this reason the works of Molière are sadder than the tragedies of Racine. But both these opposing forms of the theatrical phenomenon – tragedy and comedy, specializing in turn in Laughter or Terror and Pity – rise from the same source: our anxiety and solitude (Barrault, 24).

It is due to a sense of detachment we regularly experience that the activity of watching a film or going to the theatre instills in us a feeling of relief and emotional comfort, as people – gregarious by nature – find safety in numbers. The very same psychological maneuver is exercised by Beckett, Pinter and Lynch on their audiences. The enclosed communities of *Twin Peaks*, *The Homecoming* or *Waiting for Godot* release the seeming touch of consolation and psychological security, as these are the best grounds to build suspense upon.

It is this feeling of solitude, which we meet with in life which has given us the desire to gather in one agreed meeting place. It is this feeling of solitude which has evoked the theatrical representation (Barrault, 24).

Hence, all the artists present their audiences with a similar build-up of atmosphere. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* we witness a simple dialogue-based situation between two comrades

within the process of waiting. The grain of insecurity, this “waiting” theme gradually evokes and gives the audience a sense of unease that does not leave them until the end of the play and remains long afterwards. Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* is quite similar to the Beckettian play in the sense of the motif of waiting, which accompanies the characters and proves to be a catalyst for Stanley’s demise. Nonetheless, in this case, as well as in Beckett, the end of the play suggests a comeback to “normality” and shows that this situation may well have never happened. A different indication of the menacing end is presented in Lynch’s pictures, where the idyllic existence of superficial American towns is overshadowed by the dark side of human nature and corruption it breeds. Here, the happy ending is never fulfilled, since the instances of *Blue Velvet* or *Twin Peaks* show that evil occupies a permanent place in every community and, thus, will always remain an integral part of human existence. In this very instance it is the linguistic code and the specific type of discourse that signify the lapse between the neutral and the menacing within the process of the plot creation pursued by the artists.

The notion of linguistic menace is by far a crucial part of the artists’ mode of staging psychodrama of the ordinary. Menace of language finds its reflection in the technique of multi-layered undertones, repetitions and self-echoing. Also, their means of using extensive pauses (especially in the case of Beckett and Pinter) is of paramount importance. The appearance of pauses in Beckett’s and Pinter’s writings proves to be a personal manifesto of the authors’ viewpoints on the role of language as a medium of interpersonal communication. For Samuel Beckett, pauses strive to visualize, amongst others, the ultimate incapability of language to put across intended meanings.

The pauses in these plays are crucial. They enable Beckett to present: silences of inadequacy, when characters cannot find the words they need; silences of repression, when they are struck dumb by the attitude of their interlocutor or by their sense that they might be breaking a social taboo; and silences of anticipation, when they await the response of the other which will give them a temporary sense of existence (Worton, 75).

This quest for essence presented by the artists is additionally supported and to a large extent juxtaposed with numerous repetitions, ranging from doubled statements to the involving multiple characters process of self-echoing.

As far as Pinter is concerned, the well known line from *The Birthday Party*: “This house is on the list” (Pinter 22, 27, 30) is consecutively re-mentioned by Meg and Pete and Meg and Stanley on three different occasions. The line, in itself being thought-provoking, builds up its menacing effect on the reader by its constant re-appearance, going from a non-important casual statement to a secret coded message. As Andrew Kennedy suggests:

A Pinter character’s speech can, eventually, be ‘pinned down’ to an identifiable person even when it is used to conceal identity (Kennedy, 169).

These are, then, the instances of sheer linguistic menace, the technique which Pinter unquestionably has proven to have mastered.

A familiar method of constructing linguistic apprehension can be observed within the example of Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* – the film which is saturated with numerous self-echoing statements. Dorothy’s re-appearing line: “I carry your disease in me”, signifies her fascination with Jeffrey’s sense of internal purity and innocence that she so yearns for. In her words: “I need you in me” she voices her desire to fill herself with the boy’s genuine goodness. In the bar Paul approaches subjugated Jeffrey clapping his hands twice in front of the boy’s eyes, saying: “I’m Paul”. The act of clapping hands signals an attempt to awaken Jeffrey from an idyllic long-term dream he lived in and to make him aware of the fact that what seemed to be a mere illusion is now the only reality he will be able to know and the only one he is doomed to live in. Frank’s repeated sentence: “Now is dark”, on the other hand, is a warning of the forthcoming dark side of human nature covered with the blackness of night.

The extensive use of repetition and self-echoing statements in all the mentioned works points back to the technique of psychodrama. The more repeated the sequence is, the more uncomfortable

and creepy it becomes. This viewpoint is reminiscent of the Beckettian idea concerning the privacy of language. According to him, people speak individual languages consisting of other people's utterances. Nothing can be said, it can only be re-said. Nothing can be named. It can only be re-named. Thus, identical utterances have to be used for various purposes, expressing diverse meanings. Hence, no repetition is an exact repetition, either in Beckett or in Pinter. This in itself creates menace. The discourse of Lynch's characters can be equally equivocal, yet, because of its visual aspect, can be represented on more than one linguistic level.

Psychodrama of the ordinary is irrefutable amongst the most innovative, yet unconventional artistic concepts. The main aim of this paper is to prove Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and David Lynch as being prime representatives of these two notions in both drama and film. Through this complimentary breakdown of aspects involving the works of Lynch, Beckett and Pinter we can assimilate more easily the abstract and figurative content of what can only be described as an authorized depiction of human existence paralleled with its theatrical dimension. The question of reality is emphasized in all the artists' works, which allows the audience to appreciate the gap that has been bridged by the artists' realization that the audience has an automatic appreciation of what they are seeing and reading due to the mirror process of reality versus its theatrical representation. Therefore, if to exist means to be perceived, it is the continuous process of the external and internal self-reflection that constitutes the essence of human existence and elucidates our *true* identities.

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