

Samuel Beckett's *Breath* on Screen: Damien Hirst's Adaptation

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Abstract: The *Beckett on Film* project, which includes nineteen stage plays, is an indication of how Beckett's work's journey from stage to screen can be creative, attractive, and entertaining. As a collaborative work of RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann), Channel 4 (the British broadcaster), the Irish Film Board, and Tyrone Productions, the project includes films, ranging from approximately forty-five seconds to two hours. As each of them was assigned to a different director, *Beckett on Film* offers a chance to explore how individual viewpoints shape the adaptations. This article analyses how Damien Hirst reinterpreted Beckett's shortest piece *Breath*. As it consists solely of an inhalation and exhalation, *Breath* serves as an example of the object voice, as theorised by Jacques Lacan and Mladen Dolar. In filming *Breath*, Hirst opts for using medical waste to interpret Beckett's stage with rubbish framed with a breath.

Keywords:

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Ekranada Samuel Beckett'in Nefes Oyunu: Damien Hirst'ün Uyarlaması

Öz: On dokuz sahne oyununu kapsayan *Beckett on Film* (Beckett Filmleri) projesi, Beckett'in eserlerinin sahneden beyazperdeye olan yolculuğunun yaratıcı, ilgi çekici ve eğlenceli olabileceğinin bir göstergesidir. İrlanda yayın kuruluşu RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann), İngiliz yayın kuruluşu Channel 4, İrlanda Film Kurulu ve Tyrone Yapım'ın ortak çalışması olan proje, yaklaşık kırk beş saniye ile iki saat arasında değişen filmleri içermektedir. Filmlerin her biri farklı bir yönetmene verildiğinden, *Beckett on Film* bireysel bakış açılarının uyarlamaları nasıl şekillendirdiğini inceleme imkânı sunmaktadır. Bu makale, Damien Hirst'ün Beckett'in en kısa eseri olan *Nefes*'i nasıl yeniden yorumladığını analiz etmektedir. Sadece nefes almak ve nefes vermektен ibaret olan *Nefes*, Jacques Lacan ve Mladen Dolar tarafından kuramsallaştırılan "nesne ses"e örnek teşkil etmektedir. Hirst, *Nefes*'i filme alırken, Beckett'in nefesle çerçevelenmiş çöp dolu sahnesini yorumlamak için tıbbi atıkları kullanmayı tercih etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Samuel Beckett,
Nefes,
Damien Hirst,
Uyarlama,
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Sandro Botticelli's famous Renaissance painting *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486) (see fig.1) depicts Zephyrus, the Greek god of the west wind, together with Aura, the goddess of breezes, blowing the goddess of love, ashore, visualising the two active deities' breath through the white paint. The representation of breath is not only limited to visual arts, but also extends to the performance arts. However, the static aspect of the painting differs from the dynamic structure of theatre and film. While colours catch the attention of the viewers in paintings, action—either live or recorded—is dominant in performance arts. In this respect, Botticelli displays the presence of breath with white lines radiating from Zephyrus' and Aura's mouths.

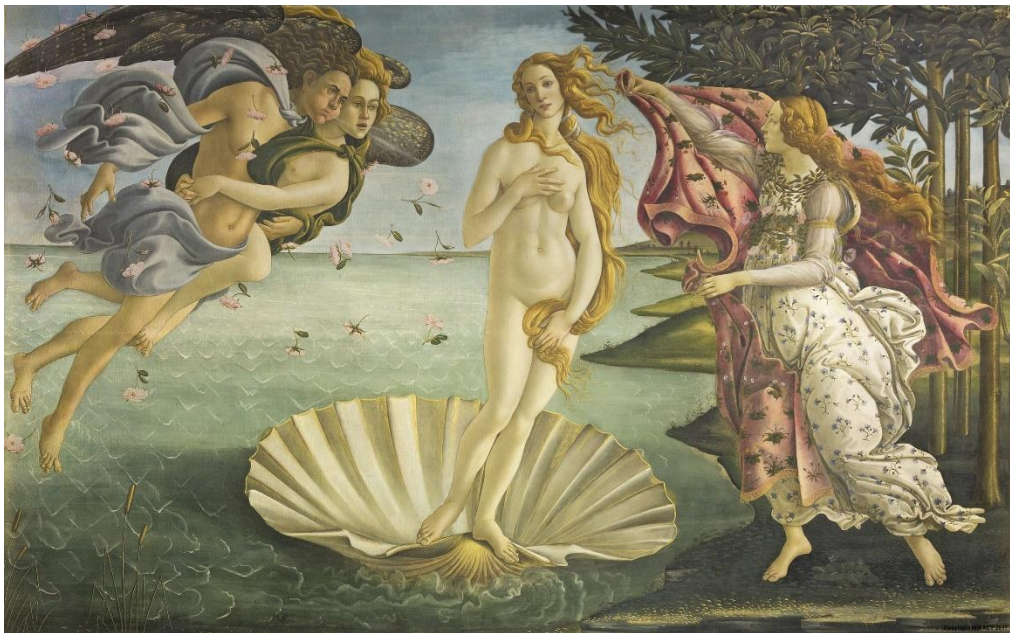


Fig. 1. Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. c.1486, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>.

The word 'breath' has various connotations in different cultures and religions. The ancient Greeks used the word *pneuma* for 'breath', which "referred to the mystical union of spirit, soul, and breath" (Caponigro 7). The ancient Romans, in turn, expressed the close connection between wind, breath, and soul with the Latin word *spiritus*, which also means "God within the breath" (Caponigro 7). Samuel Beckett uses the word "inspiration" (211), which means the drawing in of breath that is also related to creativity: "[I]nspiration is usually attributed to a divinity or muse and reckoned to be a good thing" (Pope 91). This connection between breath and creativity can be traced back to the divine breath of God. According to Christian myth, in the creation of the universe, God "formed man of the dust

of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2.7). The life-giving force of God through breath indicates that without the breath of God, there would be no life, not even the trace of existence. God’s breath as a life-giving force is further reinforced by the Islamic tradition, which has Maryam, the Virgin Mary, impregnated by a divine blow through the archangel, Gabriel. In *The Qur’an*, God’s voice specifies: “We breathed into her of Our Spirit” (Al-Anbiya 21.91). This, too, suggests that breath has the generative power of creating a new life.

At the same time, breath also has the potential to serve as a destructive force. This is exemplified, for instance, in the biblical story of the fall of Jericho, the Canaanite city that the Israelites attacked. The Israelites conquer Jericho with the power of sound when God commands that the priests should blow the rams’ horns and the folk should shout:

And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city. . . . So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight in, and they took the city. (*Book of Joshua* 6.16-20)

In other words, sonic vibrations, produced both by mediated (trumpets) and unmediated breaths, coming out of the horns and the mouths of people, destroy the walls. This suggests that sound has the potential power of a weapon.

Samuel Beckett approaches the phenomenon of breathing in his shortest piece, *Breath* (1969), in a minimalist but striking way. Beckett opts for emphasising the power of sound. Reading the full script, including the stage instructions requires less than one minute, and the act of breathing constitutes the essence of the play:

CURTAIN

1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.
2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.
3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.

CURTAIN

RUBBISH

No verticals, all scattered and lying.

CRY

Instant of recorded vagitus. Important that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath.

BREATH

Amplified recording.

MAXIMUM LIGHT

Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back. (Beckett 211)

Due to its extreme brevity, *Breath* occupies a unique place in Beckett's oeuvre. Regarded as "the shortest play ever written" (Law 464), *Breath* lasts approximately forty seconds when performed, and does not feature any visible actor or actress. It is also less analysed than Beckett's more renowned works. William Hutchings claims that the word "floccinaucinihilipilification – describes the dismissive attitude of surprisingly many of even Beckett's admirers in regard to this play: the act of underestimating the value of a thing because it is small, slight, or seems insignificant" (19). This, however, does not mean that *Breath* is less original or less important than Beckett's other pieces.

The distinctiveness of *Breath* does not only lie in its brevity but also in its impressive use of sound, as it consists of two cries, one inhalation and exhalation. Reducing the existence of a human being to one breath between two cries, Beckett comments on life, which begins with a cry out of the darkness and ends with the second one, again from the dark. Beckett excludes the existence of any physical character but concentrates on the power of sounds. Both cries are specified as "recorded vagitus," the first cry of a newly born baby. These recorded cries might come from a body, but they are produced by electronic means. Similarly, Beckett instructs both inhalation and exhalation as "amplified recording," which indicates that the volume of the electronic sound must be increased. Moreover, cries and breath off stage denote that Beckett wishes to obscure the source of the sound. In other words, this voice is deliberately detached from the body that produces them. As "a voice coming from somewhere unknown, a disembodied voice, is encountered with increasing frequency in Beckett's works" (Campbell 458), it is no surprise that Beckett makes the audiences hear the voices without seeing their source.

The adaptation of *Breath* has always been subject to discussion, not only among Beckett scholars but also for the playwright himself. It was first staged by the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, who included it as the opening contribution to his erotic revue *Oh! Calcutta!* in New York (1969). However, Beckett was so angry about the naked bodies on stage that his dissatisfaction prompted him to call Tynan "a liar" and "a cheat" (Bair 603). Beckett frequently underlines the importance of strict adherence to both dialogue and stage directions by emphasising that any production which disregarded his stage directions was completely unacceptable (Brater 107). Tynan's production, which reinforced this unacceptability, enraged Beckett; however, although he attempted legal action, his contract prevented any urgent interference and, consequently, Beckett failed to refuse permission to have it performed.

Apart from Tynan's first notorious interpretation of *Breath*, there have been other revivals¹, but when none of them satisfied Beckett, he declined any possible reproductions in a letter to an agent, Jenny Sheridan: "I have come to the conclusion it is almost impossible to do *Breath* correctly in the theatre so I must ask you to decline this request and all future ones for the play" (Gontarski 441). Beckett's wish has been respected in the theatre, as Beckett underlined; however, this does not mean that it cannot be reproduced in another medium. In this context, the play has become a focus of attention for the screen as well. Beckett productions, still meticulously examined by the Beckett Estate that is managed by the author's nephew, Edward Beckett, occasionally become a matter of debate and in one instance prompted the director, Deborah Warner, to describe the Beckett Estate as "conservers of museum pieces" (Gussow 129). In the case of *Breath*, there are three screen adaptations². While National Theatre School of Canada Technical Production produced a traditional version by showing rubbish in a rather dark atmosphere, Darren Smyth opted for a weird rattling noise with a continuous fuzzy image. In this article, I will concentrate on the 2000 production of *Beckett on Film* project, directed by Damien Hirst at Ardmore Studios, Ireland.

Hirst is a renowned artist who rose to fame for his installation pieces. Commissioning him as a director led to a film that echoes his previous works. The very setting of *Breath*, for instance, is reminiscent of Hirst's earlier piece *Waste* (1994), which consists of a closed glass vitrine, overcrowded with silicone rubber and various medical waste. The colours and materials used in *Waste* are so similar to those used in *Breath* that those who are familiar with Hirst's installations can suspect that he either unsealed or broke his closed vitrine for the film. In any case, while reinterpreting Beckett's stage filled with various rubbish, Hirst takes the liberty of using medical waste, which frequently features in his previous works, such as syringes, kidney-shaped surgical plastic trays, and medical bottles. The chaotic atmosphere is reinforced by the scattered keyboards, a monitor, and a portable hospital tray, which is lying face-down as if there recently had been an explosion.

Hirst's film starts with the camera panning over the medical remnants. Although Beckett specifies a "faint brief cry and immediately inspiration" (211), Hirst completely abandons the cry that Beckett calls an "instant of recorded vagitus" (211). He respects Beckett's script by not showing an actor in the frame, and by having the single breath with which he leaves the audience reproduced by an amplified actor's voice. The obscurity of the sound's source keeps the audience in suspense throughout, which ends with an exhalation of someone, as if this is his last breath.

¹ *Breath* was revived at the Close Theatre Club in Glasgow in 1969, at the Oxford Playhouse in 1970, at Florida State University Gallery and Museum in 1992, at the Barbican Theatre in 1999, at the Projects Arts Centre, in Dublin in 2007.

² *Breath*, directed by Damien Hirst in 2000, *Breath* produced by National Theatre School of Canada Technical Production in 2007-2008, and *Breathe* directed by Darren Smyth in 2009.

The presence of inspiration and expiration demands special attention in terms of sound because they are non-voices heard throughout the short film. As for the creative aspect of sound in the discussed film version of *Breath*, inspiration as the initial sonic wave denotes the beginning of life. Hirst gradually increases light during this inhalation by following Beckett's instruction. Towards the end of inspiration, there is such an intense light that the brightness covers the whole screen. William Hutchings criticises Hirst for spoiling Beckett's instructions by claiming that Hirst's version "not only excises the theatrical elements that Beckett himself eliminated but also the lighting effect, the timing, and the soundtrack" (20). Hutchings's claim suggests that the adaptations should strictly follow the source text, yet he disregards the fact that "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 8). In fact, Hirst's lighting instructions are in tune with his interpretation of *Breath*, which comments on the shortness of life, comprised of inhalation and exhalation.

With regard to breath, the importance of amplified recording instructed by Beckett is worth mentioning because the sources of both inspiration and expiration are not visible. Hirst amplifies the voice of Keith Allen via technological means and, moreover, separates the sound from its body. Technology plays a pivotal role in achieving this distance. This voice amplification ensures that "what everyone is hearing is not the human voice but an electronically re-created human voice, as one would get from listening to a CD, film, or television program" (Hischak 147). These electronically transmitted non-voices create a distance between the sound and its source, serving as examples of the "object voice," as theorised by psychoanalyst Mladen Dolar. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar expands on Jacques Lacan's concept of the object voice by declaring that "the voice stems from the body, but is not its part, and it upholds language without belonging to it, yet, in this paradoxical topology, this is the only point they share – and this is the topology of the *objet petit a*" (73). During inhalation and exhalation, audiences hear disembodied non-voices. Detached from the body, these voices dominate the whole screen, and assume an enigmatic aspect. As Dolar underlines, "it is the mechanical voice which confronts us with the object voice, its disturbing and uncanny nature" (22). Viewers of *Breath* wonder who inhales and exhales and are eventually preoccupied with the question of the source and reason of the breath in the film.

The mysterious non-voices hovering around the screen display a spectral quality. This ghostly not-quite-yet-voice, which "floats freely in a mysterious intermediate domain and thereby acquires the horrifying dimension of omnipresence and omnipotence" (Žižek 92) puzzles the audience. Inspiration and expiration, freed from a corporeal body, emanate from an unknown, even unknowable, acousmatic source. The latter term was coined by the French film theorist Michel Chion, who describes it as "the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source" (465). This obscurity evokes the link between divine power and creativity. As Elizabeth Gilbert in her 2009 TedX talk titled "Your Elusive Creative Genius" points out, while describing pre-Romantic explanations of inspiration: "[P]eople believed that creativity was this divine

attendant spirit that came to human beings from some distant and unknowable source, for distant and unknowable reasons” (6:23-6:33). This suggests that the obscurity of the creative source sustains its power. The ambiguity of the powerful invisible source in terms of sound is exemplified by Francis Barraud’s painting, *His Master’s Voice* (1898) (see fig. 2), which depicts the dog Nipper, listening attentively to his master’s voice recorded on the gramophone. The painting, also used as an advertisement, draws attention to sound fidelity. Dolar, too, refers to this painting by declaring that “the dog doesn’t see the source of the voice, he is puzzled and staring into the mysterious orifice, but he believes – he believes all the more for not seeing the source; the acousmatic master is more of a master than his banal visible versions” (77). Nipper’s fascination with what he hears is depicted by his looking carefully inside the gramophone’s sound horn. In other words, mysterious voices coming from a recording machine not only obscure the source of the voice, but also assume a powerful effect in leaving the listener in suspense. With reference to Sigmund Freud’s concept of the “uncanny,” Dolar articulates this ghost-like quality of the recorded and replayed voice in his discussion of the Lacanian object voice:

There is an uncanniness in the gap which enables a machine, by purely mechanical means, to produce something so uniquely human as voice and speech. It is as if the effect could emancipate itself from its mechanical origin, and start functioning as a surplus – indeed, as the ghost in the machine; as if there were an effect without a proper cause, an effect surpassing its explicable cause. (7-8)



Fig. 2. Francis Barraud’s *His Master’s Voice*. 1898. Wikimedia Commons.

The spectral inhalation and exhalation in *Breath* has the same effect by creating a ghostly existence without displaying their sources. The expectation of whether the ending of the film will unveil the source of these ghostly non-voices is disappointed, and in this context, the ending of Hirst's film sustains the non-voice's uncanny power. As the ghostly exhalation, conveyed by a mechanical voice, is about to dissolve into the air, the camera moves away from the medical setting by showing some cigarette butts in an ashtray. Coupled with the exhalation, these cigarette butts, due to their association with lung cancer, evoke how pleasurable breathing can actually lead to death. In addition to the suffocating smoke of cigarette, which makes breathing difficult, the arrangement of the cigarette butts in the shape of a swastika is striking. In the ancient Indian tradition, it was used as a "symbol of divinity endowing happiness, peace and prosperity" (Avari 65). In addition to these positive definitions, in Judaism, it represents the "Wheel of Eternal Life" (Elst 252). But in the context of the 20th century, its dominant association is that of the emblem of the Nazi Party since 1920 (Liungman 586), and its positive meaning turned into a negative one, representing hate, racism, mass murder, and genocide. In this respect, the choice of the swastika also echoes the last breath of the people who lost their lives in gas chambers and elsewhere. Not only the cigarette butts but also the swastika they form can be regarded as representing life-draining forces. As opposed to smokers, who voluntarily risk developing lung cancer by inhaling cigarette smoke, those murdered in the gas chambers were forced to inhale the poisonous gas Zyklon B. Expiration as the last sound refers to the end of life. The end of life is also supported by the lighting effect, because as the sound of expiration is heard, the brightness of light gradually decreases by giving way to darkness. Moreover, the expiration, as heard in the ending of *Breath*, gives the impression that there is a difficulty and even an agony connected to breathing, yet the voice keeps its enigmatic aspect.

To sum up, Beckett comments on life and death in *Breath* in a concise way, and Damien Hirst reproduces it for the screen while fanning out different meanings through his choice of a medical setting. Due to its aural dominance, *Breath* "can be described as a sound installation, a sound art piece, or a sound tableau" (Goudouna 107). Although Sozita Goudouna's repetition of the word "sound" suggests that sound is the core element, Hirst's *Breath* also serves as an example of how the object voice is revealed through inspiration and expiration. The mysterious object voice in Hirst's *Breath* draws attention to both the creative side of inspiration with its potential of life-giving force, and to the destructive power of inhalation, as reflected by the associations with cigarette smoke and poisonous gas. Furthermore, Hirst's *Breath* stresses the creative force of expiration, as exemplified in Genesis and *The Qur'an*, and the destructive power of expiration, as described in the case of the fall of Jericho. Consequently, the relationship between life and death, conveyed to the audience by the mechanical voice in a medical setting, reveals voice both as a presence and an absence.

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