

Procedural Absurdity and Epistemic Obedience: Disciplinary Power in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of absurdity in Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter (1960) not only as a stylistic register, but as a mechanism for institutional control. The study intends to follow how instructions are maintained even if reasons or feasibility are denied, which is called the procedural absurdity, thus leading to a new consideration of Ben's role of epistemic obedience, compliance based on habit rather than understanding. The research uses a qualitative, textual method, based on the close reading, Esslin's (2001) theory of the absurd and Foucauldian (1995) theory, and applied to the exchanges of the newspapers, the kettle dispute, the food orders, the speaking tube, pauses, and the final instruction. The analysis shows that uncertainty subjugates Ben, turning him into a relay that reproduces commands to Gus. The play acknowledges the procedural nature of obedience, and the political power of turning incomprehension into institutional measures of discipline.*

Keywords: *The Dumb Waiter*, Procedural Absurdity, Epistemic Obedience, Disciplinary Power, Institutional Authority

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) uses an extraordinarily simple set: two hired killers, Ben and Gus, wait for orders in a windowless basement; a newspaper, a kettle, a speaking tube and a serving hatch come to possess an increasing amount of power. The play's economy has led some critics to read into its components: failure to communicate, menace, bureaucracy, surveillance, or obedience, and existential absurdity. Those readings are impossible to overlook, but they pose an issue for any new interpretation, because they are so many. Now the question is not whether language, silence and unseen authority count in the play but how! The ways these elements, which are already known to readers of the play, are handled by the play have not been fully clarified.

The Dumb Waiter (1960) does not simply set up an absurdist uncertainty next to institutional power, it also becomes a working method of power. Every time, Ben and Gus come across statements and demands with grounds that are either missing or shifting, with referents that are slippery or unstable,

or with practicability that never comes. But, if there are no clear explanations, it doesn't stop people from doing something. It yields more checking and correcting, waiting, reporting, apologising, and readiness. The play thus maps a political conundrum – the more unaware the players are of the system, the more full-fledged they are in their organisation around the demands of the system.

The phrase “procedural absurdity” to refer to this formal-political mechanism. It is not offered as a new theatrical genre or as an alternative to the account of absurdist drama offered by Esslin (2001). It refers to a recognizable procedure, instruction, correction, report, order or routine, which is repeated in this specific play despite the lack of the knowledge that would logically require it to. Here are two related ideas which explain the consequences. Epistemic obedience: obedience that requires neither understanding nor agreement; obedience that is based on acceptance of incomplete information as good enough. Disciplinary relay refers to Ben's double role as a subordinate whom the organisation is disciplining, and as the local agent who is making the habits of command, which are normal to the organisation, his own.

The central inquiry therefore extends beyond Pinter's dramatization of power through language. The play's distinctive political quality is that it demonstrates how a structure can become an instrument for incomprehension: absurdity becomes disciplinary as characters learn to treat ambiguous signals as routine responses. This argument also puts Gus' constant questioning in a new perspective. What makes him important is not that he is a coherent rebel, because he's not. Instead, his repeated quests for reasons, names, explanations, causal links are an epistemic form of dissent, ones that abrogate the need for orders to be actionable but intelligible given that they can't be.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several different, but interconnected criticisms of Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), not one of which comes anywhere near to the argument put forward in this article. Wardle's concept of the “comedy of menace” captures the coexistence of comic routine and latent threat (Wardle, 1958, pp. 28–33). This tension is evident in Ben's reassuring assertion, “Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything” (Pinter, 1960, p. 11). Like other postwar dramatists associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, Pinter's drama privileges repetition, incongruity, and existential uncertainty over conventional exposition, motivation, and causal explanation (Esslin, 2001). Pinter's drama is also characterised by an intrusive and insufficiently explained sense of authority (Esslin, 1973). Knowles (1995) and Taylor-Batty (2014) encourage attention to the specific theatrical structures and techniques of Pinter's plays rather than relying exclusively on broad generic classifications.

A second group of scholarship is more closely related; it deals with the nature of dialogue, with its failure to communicate, with its silence, with the distribution of power between individuals, Van Laan (1981) argues that Pinter provides contextual information that encourages the audience to supply possible motivations (p. 494–502), whereas Buck (2005) offers a different interpretation of the play's use of contextual information (p. 178–181). This concern is further explored in Silverstein's (1993) analysis of Pinter's language as a space of cultural power, in which verbal power struggles, correcting of expression, insisting on a preferred word, and refusing to respond to a question are ways of establishing and maintaining a hierarchy between speakers. The breaks and silences in *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) are not trivial but rather significant and imbued with connotations of fear, menace, and

mortality (Marrouchi, 2019). Gus's disreputable aside about the sheets he has been given — "That's taking a bit of a liberty, isn't it?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 5) — is exactly the kind of load-bearing exchange Marrouchi describes, one which Ben is unwilling to explain (Marrouchi, 2019).

A third, and more recent, criticism is a critique of the political, in this case the Foucauldian strand to which this article anticipates and derives its theoretic jargon. The dumb waiter and the speaking tube are read in this line of criticism as an instrument of unseen power to discipline and monitor both Ben and Gus without having to display itself (Il, 2009, p. 65–88). While Foucault's (1995) disciplinary theory is applied more systematically to the closed space of the play, its repetitive movement, and production of knowledge and obedience, the limited resistance the two men can offer is also considered (Jia, 2024, p. 106–113). Obedience in the choreography of the scene is not a consequence of the comic exterior of this play, but one of its concerns; it is the only place that the discomfort felt by the men is revealed, when Gus finally asks, "Why did he send us matches if he knew there was no gas? (Pinter, 1960, p. 20), to which there was no reply (Deka, 2021, p. 262–267). Similarly relatedly, but using the term of 'defamiliarisation' instead of Foucault (1995), it is concluded that *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and *The Room* (1960) constitute a 'political comedy' in a 'twisted form of communication' and 'limited space' which results in 'mental and physical subjection' (Khaled, 2024, p. 159–191). Sofer (2003) offers a broader account of the theatrical life of props, treating them as active elements in dramatic action rather than merely as background objects within power relations.

The paper does not reject the major critical tendencies emerging from a combined reading of these three strands of scholarship: *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) is formally absurd, it distributes power unevenly between Ben and Gus, and it is formally organised in ways that can be read through a Foucauldian framework of discipline and surveillance (Foucault, 1995). What this convergence has so far not resulted in, however, is a systematic description of the causal connection between the play's absurdist shape and the play's production of obedience. Previous research shows that uncertainty, lack of information, and arbitrary power are all present in the play, but fail to fully account for why these conditions lead to ongoing compliance rather than confusion, refusal, or breakdown. Peacock (1997) and Merritt (1990) place the play in the context of Pinter's broader theatrical evolution, and even they identify the absurdist and political aspects as secondary to each other instead of as a unity. Quigley (1975) provides an influential account of the instability of meaning in Pinter's dialogue that goes beyond political readings; it anticipates such later Foucauldian readings. The current scholarship then already provides evidence for the absurdity, communicative failure, and the disciplinary power in *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), but not adequate for an explanation of how these three elements interact to produce continued compliance. This article fills that void by exploring the role of procedural absurdity in creating epistemic uncertainty and the role of that uncertainty in enabling obedience to the institutional, with Ben serving as an intermediary through whom institutional commands are sent to Gus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Esslin (2001) and Foucault (1995) are useful in this argument, but in different ways as two different labels. Esslin (2001) provides the vocabulary to describe the two things that invalidate rational explanation, the continuity of cause and effect, and the stability of meaning in absurdist plays. Foucault (1995) provides a concept of power other than, but surely in conjunction with, spectacular violence: a model of power that is wielded through normalising styles of operation, routines, simple methods,

observation, and production of compliant subjects. His emphasis on the practice of power as opposed to its possession is particularly pertinent to the question of whether power is oppressor or victim (Foucault, 1995, p. 26). So the contribution of the present study is threefold. Procedural absurdity is a formal sequence that leads from deficient knowledge to a more intense procedure, i.e., the first. Second, in the play, compliance is differentiated from ideology: Epistemic obedience. Third, the concept of Ben as a disciplinary relay takes the analysis out of the dominant/victim dichotomy.

This absurdity of procedure manifests itself in the intersection of these two problems. In this article, a scene will be deemed procedurally absurd if it fulfils three conditions: Procedural information (such as an instruction, correction, order, report, or work routine) appears in the scene, but some information is lacking, contradictory, or practically impossible to obtain, and the characters still proceed as if the procedure was present. The idea is not what is considered as absurd, but it is more of a concept. Not everything that is meaningless is procedurally absurd; but when it is made so.

This is the name given to the subject-position produced by this conversion: epistemic obedience. It is the obedience in the face of lack of information. The subject must not be convinced that an order is true, good or reasonable, all he has to do is take it as an order. The disciplinary relay is, in turn, the way this obedience circulates. Ben gets partial instructions from above, and turns them into absolute facts for Gus, who he corrects, limits, and who is the conduit by which lethal instructions in the organisation can be applied. The model also suggests that the most politically revealing moments in the play will be those in which Ben takes uncertainty and turns it into command, as well as when authority speaks.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical, theory-based close reading of the published text of *The Dumb Waiter* (1960). The unit of analysis is not the individual quotation but the dramatic sequence. The six dramatic sequences selected for analysis are: (1) opening newspaper exchanges; (2) debate about how the kettle is prepared; (3) Ben's repeated efforts to dissuade Gus from wondering and questioning; (4) finally, the increasingly intractable food orders from the dumb waiter; (5) the upward exchange of words via the speaking-tube; and (6) last, the final identification of the arriving target and the wordless confrontation between Ben and Gus. These scenes also describe the dramatic shift in what was a normal waiting to the ultimate crisis, which helps to follow the development of the argument while eliminating extraneous examples.

A four-part interpretive framework is employed to analyse each dramatic sequence. It shows (a) the information that is missing or unstable in the scene, (b) the procedural demand in play regardless of the information gap, (c) the character or object that conveys, corrects or enforces the demand, and (d) the behavioural response generated by the demand. The imperative, repetition, lexical correction, pauses and silences, stage directions, movement of props and the timing of information are paid attention to. These are not features being counted on a statistical, but are being used to illustrate how they are part of recurring sequences throughout the play.

Finally, to minimize confirmation bias, the analysis is focused on counter-moments of procedure breakdowns and challenges. Gus's questions are not seen as an act of obedience, nor is his irritation

with the food orders, nor is his attempt to address the unseen authority. There is a sense that his questions are not kept as a means of obeying, but are treated as a potential disruption while the irritation with the food orders and the attempt to address the unseen authority is not automatically understood as obedience. These moments are considered to be either part of an interruption of the institutional sequence or part of the institutional sequence. Secondary scholarship is employed mainly as a means of establishing what has already been argued and to put to the test the distinctiveness of the present interpretation. The pager numbers refer to the Faber version of the play, as found in the digital script in the reference list (Pinter, 1960).

FINDINGS

The analysis shows that *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) demonstrates the concept of obedience as a process that results gradually in obedience over time, not necessarily through direct physical force. The characters are continually put in situations where instructions are vague, information is incomplete, or the requirements of the unseen authority, seemingly unreasonable. Procedural absurdity is also relevant here as it enables to handle the uncertain situation as a routine compliance issue. Especially Ben is more and more willing to embrace and repeat these processes, and transforms incomplete information into small action steps for Gus. Meanwhile, Gus's persistent questioning and efforts to make sense of things highlight the nature of such obedience and the conflicting dynamics of compliance with the instruction and its underlying rationale. The absurdity of the play is thus linked closely to the representation of power from a disciplinary perspective: uncertainty does not only create confusion, but can also lead to dependence, compliance, and the repetition of authority in the commonplace action, language, silence and routine.

PROCEDURAL ABSURDITY AND DISCIPLINED RESPONSE

The beginning newspaper routine seems the least institutional section of the play. Gus dresses, walks around the room, and asks questions, while Ben reads short reports on highly unusual violence. But this seemingly offhand comment sets up the epistemic pattern that the later commands rely upon. Ben says, "A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 1). When Gus only admits that he is not convinced, Ben concludes the exchange by saying, "It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 1). The rhetorical question more than describes (or characterizes) him as easily disgusted. It transforms shared reaction into an alternative to explanation: the item is regarded as reportable and therefore actionable as conversation itself without the man asking how an eighty-seven-year-old could be under a lorry in the first place.

Gus responds differently. His repeated queries seek missing information, particularly the causes of unexpected conditions, unexplained details, and improbable reports. The humor comes from the juxtaposition of the insignificant newspaper format and the violence reported in it, but the political significance comes from the different reading habits. Ben considers informational form as enough; Gus considers incompleteness as a call for more. The scene thus anticipates in miniature the later battle between procedural compliance and epistemic demand.

This distinction is important because the newspaper isn't a clear order. No superior has ever told Ben to believe it. But, to an extent, Ben practices the mental operation that institutional discipline will demand: Take the authorised message, ignore the missing explanation, and go on with the routine. The play shows this habituation by having Ben repeat almost the same routine at the end of the action and

ask Gus, “Have you ever heard such a thing?” (Pinter, 1960, p. 21). He receives the same perfunctory approval that he received at the beginning. The absurdity of the situation starts before the dumb waiter gets to moving and continues without alteration after the men get rattled with unsettling far more profound than any. Pinter creates a subject that on demand can make an incomplete text into certainty and another who on demand interrupts the process of converting the text into certainty with questions.

COMMAND AND EPISTEMIC OBEDIENCE

It is typically interpreted as a form of Pinterian “verbal comedy”, particularly through repetition, incongruity, and cross-purpose dialogue (Dukore, 1982), as well as a contest for superiority or an instance of language’s inability to communicate effectively. The above reading is correct but partial. The dispute also illustrates how a rule can become binding without any firm foundation other than that of one speaker who wants it to be. So, when Gus continues to reject the preferred idiom, Ben gives up the argument and asks, “Who’s the senior partner here, me or you?” (Pinter, 1960, p. 8). The question does not settle the semantics issue but only the semantics of rank.

The key sequence is correction, objection, intensified correction, and submission. Gus inquires of what the phrase means and Ben refuses to set a language standard but instead makes his preferred language the standard, stating to Gus, “I’m only looking after your interests, Gus. You’ve got to learn, mate” (Pinter, 1960, p. 8). The paternal register is important, instruction becomes care and care does not need justification other than that it is a gesture of a senior partner. The content of the rule is almost trivially insignificant, but its form is similar to that of the organisation above it: an instruction does not have to explain itself in order to organise behaviour. What seems to be a squabble over idiom will rehearse the larger institutional logic of the play.

This is why the kettle exchange is more of an epistemic form of obedience rather than a mere verbal exchange. For Ben, Gus must not only take on a phrase, he must take on a hierarchy of what is obvious. It isn’t physical resistance, it’s epistemic resistance; Ben’s formulation doesn’t make sense to Gus. In response, Ben asserts rank instead of adding in more explanation. The scene teaches the audience a principle that will be repeated with direr consequences: When the reasons are not available, the authority will provide procedure.

THE DUMB WAITER AS A COMPLIANCE INTERFACE

The mechanical dumb waiter reinforces this rule to the extreme as it makes senseless communication literal. Its opening order, which Gus reports as “Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar” (Pinter, 1960, p. 11), is already improbable, if not impossible, considering that there is no doubt that the men lack any kitchen, and at least it’s possible that there is food. The requests quickly become more than this, culminating in, “Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada” (Pinter, 1960, p. 14), which are macarones Ben need to decipher for Gus, neither of whom can make. Ben and Gus don’t have the ingredients or the facilities they need to fulfil them. A normal instrumental logic would deem the discrepancy between the request and the capacity as rendering the task invalid. Instead, the men list their inadequate supplies, send what they have, and talk about what they should do, and later try to justify themselves to the top. There is no obligation to be impossible so that obedience is not reduced, but it is increased.

It is the most explicit example of the absurdity of the procedure in the play. The food orders are absurd not only because they are bizarre but because they manage to retain the recognisable grammar of service without connecting it to a functional situation. The institution acts like its basement is a working kitchen and the men start acting as if there are real obligations that stem from this fiction. Their work becomes shifting from a question of whether the demand is sensible to handling their inability to meet it.

Thus the dumb waiter is not just a symbol of running bureaucracy or an emblem of unseen authority. It serves as a compliance interface: a device which diminishes authority in input and response. There is no verification by the men of the purpose of the requests for them, and no negotiation of the conditions under which the requests are made. The hatch communicates a sufficient amount of information to elicit action and a sufficient lack of information to avoid being evaluated. This economy of information, as it were, is why the object works so well theatrically. It's not a sovereign you can see and it's not a matter of the individual's right to have his/her case reviewed, it's about the repeated expectation of the individual to respond to every signal.

Previous Foucauldian readings are correct to highlight the apparatus and surveillance but there is another mechanism in the food-order sequence. The men are not only observed, they are encouraged to be responsive. Every order is a little experiment in seeing if they will continue to steer toward the unseen system. Interestingly, although the two finally decide to explain their failure, not the resolution to keep sending the scraps, but the failure, Ben is still procedure-oriented: "We'd better tell them," he says, "that we can't do it, we haven't got it" (Pinter, 1960, p. 15). Even if someone refuses it's reported, not challenged. The test doesn't really care the content of the request. What matters more than Scampi, macaroni or whatever the other meal they don't have is, is that Ben and Gus take the receipt of a slip of paper as an excuse to rearrange their conduct. In that respect, the school disciplines them first by procedure and afterwards by punishment.

SILENCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF DEPENDENCE

Pauses and silences in speech have always been noted as significant, and Marrouchi (2019) is correct in calling these communicative registers, which are linked to danger, uncertainty and death. The question of what silence expresses is changed to what silence does within the command structure in the present analysis. In *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), silence is a recurring theme after Gus requests information which he is not supposed to have in the organisation. The pause isn't just about tension, it also leaves the question hanging while the routine goes on.

When Gus, without being prompted, says "I find him hard to talk to, Wilson" (Pinter, 1960, p. 10), Ben responds with a rejection of the opening: "Scrub round it, will you?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 10). The idiom is dismissive just because it assumes that the question is garbage to be removed, not a statement to be answered. When Gus turns over the debris of a previous assignment and finds a question, "Who clears up after we've gone? I'm curious about that. Who does the clearing up?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 11); Ben's response provides an institutional category "departments for everything," but no information. In both cases, the question of 'wondering' is regarded as a procedural error. The problem isn't that Gus has gotten the wrong response; it's that he feels it's important to make the lack of a response relevant to action.

This distinction is very important. A traditional reading might suggest that the school's mission is to keep Gus "ignorant" so that it can control him. Procedural absurdity is the manner in which that ignorance is put to productive use. Gus will be expected to prepare, wait, and finally perform his role without information to evaluate his role. The organisation thus not only conceals knowledge but sets a de facto standard for what they won't tolerate—no knowledge is good enough to hold back.

The marked silences, too, further expand the reliance on middlemen. With Wilson never in the picture and the organisation's voice not sticking to a fully contextualised tone, Ben determines what questions are not needed, what can be called an instruction and what the correct response is from Gus. Therefore, above is stronger and more forceful because it is silent. The less direct the organisation states, the more space Ben has for him to be its interpreter and enforcer. This is why the power relation is not easily explained as a simple opposition between a boss that is not visible at first glance and two victims that are passive.

BEN AS A DISCIPLINARY RELAY

The invisible power, surveillance, the subjection of both men are often highlighted in Foucauldian accounts of the play. The disciplinary relay is a development of that, emphasizing transmission. This is not an origin of the system. He waits, has a lack of information, and is given orders. But he still, and again, makes his own enslavement his superior power over Gus. He owns the newspaper, watches usage, has power to turn off questions, understands the dumb waiter and communicates via the tube. Power is effective when it is reproduced by someone who is himself within its field.

This relay is nearly literal with the speaking tube. The apparatus creates a vertical space through which voices move from one level to another but not all equals. However, when information has to be passed up, Ben's interaction with them is deferential, even servile: "Good evening. I'm sorry to bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left" (Pinter, 1960, p. 16). It's an employee apologizing for an inventory issue; it's not a man reporting to an invisible and unaccountable power. It does not establish an equality of voices in the technology: Ben provides the only voice which the system below can hear.

The climactic teaching is particularly informative. The final warning is received and Ben is informed that the target is coming near and the last words he speaks on the tube to them are the simple response: "Sure we're ready" (Pinter, 1960, p. 22). No mention in the exchange of the identity of the person they are going to kill, why he needs killing, or the moral nature of the act they are about to do. The instruction is giving him only what he wants him to use to execute but Ben's response is only giving him what he wants him to use to close the deal.

Now, the role that Ben plays makes sense of how he's not just the dominant partner in the discipline-relay, but the dominant partner. He is strong where Gus is weak and weak where Gus is strong. His power is thus derived and instrumental. This double status is understood with Foucault's (1995) concept of power operating in strategic positions, rather than just through possession (p. 26). Ben's obedience doesn't negate his agency; it is the context within which his agency is helpful to the system.

EPISTEMIC DISSENT AND THE LIMITS OF OBEDIENCE

As the play continues, Gus's questioning starts to have more and more significance. He enquires about his previous employment, who the victim was, Wilson's actions, the strange food orders and the layout

of the place in which they wait. All of these questions never come to a logical political agenda. This restriction is significant. Gus is no revolutionary consciousness forced into a world otherwise devoid of it. His relationship with the organisation is preserved as well as his role as a killer, and he is still a part of the organization's routines. Where his difference comes in is that he does not want the lack of explanations to make all the explanations irrelevant.

The most explicit of Gus's challenges to procedure come when his orders are ever more absurd, and he asks, "Who is upstairs?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 20). Ben's first word in response is ominous: "Enough!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 20). Gus nevertheless continues to question the situation: "What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we?" (Pinter, 1960, p. 20). Ben says again, "That's enough! I'm warning you!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 21). Ben's refusal to respond is important because it not only gives no countering argument or reassurance or information, but also terminates Gus's questioning. It's not the organisation's arrangements that are under scrutiny, but the subordinate challenging them. Pinter thus subverts traditional logic by showing the impossible order as normal and questioning it as the thing that needs to be corrected.

The final entrance transforms this epistemic conflict into a vulnerability of the body. Gus seems to not be quite ready for the job that he started out with, while Ben (as instructed) faces the one who is actually to be the target. There is no shot in the play and it is incorrect to say that Gus's death was a successful event. The ending reveals that the organisation has created a context for Ben to be able to act on incomplete information against his partner.

This last silence is therefore not simply an abstract final ambiguity. The first of the silences hides information, while the second one carries on the routine; the third one presents the end of the structure. Ben is sufficiently informable to be able to do the procedure but not to make it morally or causally intelligible. Gus, whose questions have constantly called for the missing context, has been the goal of the procedure. The curtain goes down before the revealing of Ben's selection, but the institutional achievement is clearly discernible: a subject ready to perform an order lacking any justification.

DISCUSSION

The findings above do not contradict previous criticism; rather, they reorganize the relationships among its main arguments. Esslin's (2001) absurdity accounts for the falling apart of secure rational explanation. Research on Pinter's language and his exploration of silence reveals how dialogue, pause, and omission create threat and inter-personal hierarchy. Foucault (1995) deconstructs surveillance, discipline, and invisible power. To the concept of procedural absurdity is added a mediating claim: the play's formal uncertainty is not only represented in tandem with discipline, it is one of the ways in which discipline works.

This is important because it alters the role of some familiar scenes. The kettle controversy is a comic language game and a model of rule enforcement without an explanation. The dumb waiter is not just a symbol of bureaucracy; it's an interface that converts poor messages into tasks. Silence can be more than communication or menace – it can also serve as an information deficit on which the subject needs to persist. The final command is not only a sign of hierarchy, it's a sign of the results of the process: an agent whose only role in a killing is to say "Sure we're ready" (Pinter, 1960, p. 20).

An epistemic obedience framework also provides a way to explain a problematic aspect of previous Ben and Gus discussions. Obedience depends on belief, so Ben's is not a job that can easily be described if he were to believe in a coherent ideology of the organisation he serves. He just goes through their processes as if they are self-confirming. On the other hand, Gus will not be free of his questions since he is still functioning within the same system. The difference, then, is not between belief and disbelief but between lack of knowledge and its being accepted as adequate for action. Ben takes the bait over and over again; Gus pulls against it over and over again.

The present reading also recapitulates the absurd/menace link that has been set out in materials of previous scholarship, particularly by Wardle (1958). Nothing bad can happen if there is a hidden group or an arbitrary boss. It is a result of the men learning to make the arbitrary "normal". The most disturbing aspect of the conclusion is, then, not that the institution is irrational. It is the fact that irrationality has become a process, a language, a medium of transmission, and a trained agent. Lastly, the disciplinary-relay model keeps an analysis from fixating on an abstruse sovereign. The upper level of authority is stipulated by Wilson, but it relies on Ben's local work, as he translates, corrects, silences, reports and possibly executes. The organisation is successful because its processes are passed through subjects. This provides the play with a political particularity that the purely existential reading and the simple top-down model of domination do not account for.

IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The study suggests that future readings of the power in the play should not only consider who has the authority but also the way procedure itself is employed as a means of making uncertainty compliance. Procedural absurdity, epistemic obedience and the disciplinary relay provide transferable analytical categories which could be used in other Pinter plays, as well as in institutional drama more generally, in which administrative language and incomplete information have similarly shaped character behaviour in the postwar era.

In literary theory and cultural theory, the study highlights the possibility of linking two theoretical models that of Esslin's (2001) absurdist framework and that of Foucauldian disciplinary theory (Foucault, 1995), which specifies causal relation, not thematic resemblance, in ways that yield analytic value, as well as a model for showing how formal features of a text can be shown to serve disciplinary functions instead of simply reflecting them.

The findings have implications for theatrical practice and pedagogy in terms of teaching and performing *The Dumb Waiter* (1960). The concept of epistemic obedience can be used to inspire line readings and physical responses from both actors and directors, especially in the transition from correction to command, a vocabulary that can be employed by instructors to assist students in analysing the way power is passed through intermediary actors and not just an invisible one, such as Wilson.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that it is not the discovery of an absurdist, silent, obedient, or Foucauldian power that holds the scholarly promise of rereading *The Dumb Waiter* (1960). The same elements have been noted in Pinter criticism. Its specific contribution is to demonstrate how Pinter achieves the work of

the absurd. Epistemic absurdity is when procedural communication is incomplete or impossible, and yet still has consequences; epistemic obedience is when characters learn to act without understanding; and epistemic relay of power is when one subordinate transmits the logic of another subordinate.

The movement of the sequence from newspaper to order is consistent and follows a dramaturgical pattern. Ben mastered and adopted the habit of considering text as authority. Linguistic issues escalate into rank in the kettle quarrel. The dumb waiter turns what is impossible into what is required to be done. Without silence, key information is not available, but work cannot be halted. The speaking tube is a means of directing the flow of information from one place to another using the vertical dimension. Finally, Ben confirms his readiness to be confirmed, and the final silence refuses to give the explanation that Gus has been searching for all the way through the play.

From this point of view, it is not just that institutions can be irrational or oppressive, they can be. An institution becomes most enduring when its subjects no longer require intelligibility as a condition for action. Thus the basement is not really frightening, it is just that a reason that is much more restricted in scope is still going on after the broader explanation has been taken away. That distinction forms *The Dumb Waiter*'s more pointed profile when it comes to the character of Pinter's early politics, as the play not only portrays an invisible power that dominates, but it also portrays the mundane creation of a subject who makes that invisible power viable.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this paper is to examine one brief play and to focus on a close reading of the text itself, not on performance analysis. Future research for example, could compare the utility of procedural absurdity in Pinter's other institutional environments, *The Birthday Party* (1959) and *The Caretaker* (1960), or in postwar drama generally, where administrative language, lack of knowledge and the obedience of routine combine. A comparative study might also investigate whether audiences and readers differ in how they are affected by the absurdity of procedure in a performance and how in a text or if the pacing and tone and the choices made by actors or director change the way they feel about the epistemic obedience. This comparison would be useful to decide if *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) is unique, or if it is part of a larger dramaturgy of institutional uncertainty that could be applied to the modern theatrical canon.

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