Introduction

Intermedial Beckett

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Approaching Beckett with intermediality in mind automatically calls up the vexed issues of adaptation and experimentation that pertain to his work. The fact that Beckett worked across multiple forms of media hardly needs to be highlighted here; that Beckett's oeuvre presents a long history of cross-genre experimentation is less frequently discussed. Beckett famously wrote to his American editor Barney Rosset in 1957 of his desire to keep genres "distinct" and his resistance to any forms of cross-genre adaptation (Beckett 2014, 63–64). As we move into a new phase of experimentation with and adaptation of Beckett's drama across genres and media, we need to be attentive to recent re-readings of these remarks that set them in their context. No doubt that at the time Beckett was, as Nicholas Johnson puts it in an essay discussing recent prose adaptations, "rejecting 'intermedial' transfer," but "it would be ahistorical to read this as a permanent injunction. The statement is an epistle, not the gospel" (192). There is, it might be said, a disjuncture between Beckett's statements about adaptation or mixing media and the actuality of his practices. As Pim Verhulst and Olga Beloborodova note in their contribution to this volume, Beckett's comment from the 1970s about having a "bee in [his] bonnet about mixing media" (Beckett 2000, 320) does not quite tally with the author's creative development in the post-war period. The volume of Beckett's letters covering 1957 to 1965 shows that as the author begins to work in radio and television, as well as dabble in film, requests also begin to pour in from artists wishing to adapt his work. As Dan Gunn remarks in his introduction to that volume, "as media develop and mix, Beckett finds himself both seduced and repelled" (xxviii). The wide-ranging essays of this special issue on intermediality shows the complexity of the intermedial dialogue happening both within Beckett's own practice and within the creative work it has inspired.

Historically, experimentation with Beckett's work has seemed to create tensions between the author's supposedly exact intentions—as preserved by the Estate—and the will toward creative freedom. A recent wave of cross-medial,

site-specific and 'laboratory' work might be seen however to be at the cutting edge of what is possible in regard to Beckett's work, but is also forming the cutting edge of what makes this work relevant to our current age. The essays gathered here testify to a history of Beckett's engagement with experimental and cross-medial forms, as well as to his work providing a continuing resource for aesthetic experimentation in the contemporary scene. Some essays, including Johnson's and Anna McMullan's, offer case study examples of how experimentation with Beckett may take place in careful dialogue with the proscriptions of the Estate; as their research shows, intermedial practices form one of the key elements in contemporary experimentation with Beckett's work. This *SBT/A* special issue demonstrates the richness of Beckett's medial practice, and the histories of the ways in which the boundaries between media and genre were both held distinct and blurred within that practice. Intermediality—as a way of categorising the work and as a frame for understanding and analysis—represents a new threshold over which Beckett's work is passing.

Each essay in this special issue provides a specific perspective on intermediality relative to the artwork in question and its medial form, enabling the essays to perform critical readings of the work or works in question while simultaneously interrogating their medial and intermedial nature. The authors in this volume present work ranging across multiple dominant media forms: literature, film, television, visual art, music, theatre and radio, but are also attentive to work emergent at the interstices of these forms, within mediated or digital worlds, within non-traditional spaces such as museums, galleries and other sites, and beyond the limits of published text.

Beckett's oeuvre offers a way of thinking through the nature of specific forms of media as well as the concept and practice of intermediality itself, as this volume shows. As a fundamentally multi- or intermedial artist, whose work spans multiple media forms, Beckett allows us to think through what makes each medium distinct from others as well as how media forms interweave. Yet, as these essays indicate, there is great difficulty in defining intermediality once and for all. Ironically this is to do with its specificity within particular fields of study and aesthetic practice. As Gabriele Rippl writes:

One of the reasons why it is impossible to develop *one* definition of intermediality is that it has become a central theoretical concept in many disciplines such as literary, cultural and theater studies as well as art history, musicology, philosophy, sociology, film, media and comics studies—and these disciplines all deal with different intermedial constellations which ask for specific approaches and definitions.

For Irina Rajewski intermediality has, from its beginnings, “served as an umbrella-term” with “specific objectives pursued by different disciplines (e.g. media studies, literary studies, sociology, film studies, art history) in conducting intermedial research vary[ing] considerably” (44). Rajewski further refines her definition of the term, suggesting that,

“Intermedial” therefore designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media, and which thereby can be differentiated from *intramedial* phenomena as well as from *transmedial* phenomena (i.e., the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media).

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Along with Rajewski, the work of Werner Wolf offers a detailed taxonomy of intermedial practice, especially in regard to literature. For Wolf, intermediality offers a flexible genre “that can be applied, in a broad sense, to *any* phenomenon involving more than one medium” (1999, 36).¹ Intermediality might be understood therefore as a genre unto itself, or a way of describing and understanding a mode of creative practice. With such complexities in mind, this introduction will not seek to produce a definition of intermediality, even if such a thing were possible. Nor, given the scope of this introduction will I attempt a comprehensive survey of the field of intermediality. In many ways, the richness of the essays gathered does that work and in the following I will map in brief the multi-faceted deployments of the term as they emerge across this collection of essays.

Intermediality is a term reintroduced to the arts in the 1960s by a co-founder of the avant-garde performance collective Fluxus, Dick Higgins, to describe the wave of emergent work of that time whose defining feature seemed to be that it was “between media.”² It is Higgins’s definition, with its eye on the future and new possibilities for art practice, which informs Julie Bates’s article in this volume, which focuses on visual art to trace intermedial connections between Beckett and artists Brian O’Doherty and Brian Dillon. Her essay seeks to demonstrate a porousness of boundaries between media, in a historically grounded

1 Wolf’s detailed subdivision of genres of intermediality can be found in “Intermediality” (2005, 252–256).

2 Higgins credits the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge for the term ‘intermedia,’ which appears in his writings of 1812 “in exactly its contemporary sense to define works which fall conceptually between media that are already known, and I had been using the term for several years in lectures and discussions before my little essay was written.”

investigation of how “intermedial practices might allow us to map the uneven contours of emergent modernisms.” For Bates, therefore, intermedial practices become fundamentally tied to temporality; she connects Beckett with Dillon via the notion of the failed modernist utopia that haunts Dillon’s work, the futures that never came to pass, and notes that O’Doherty shares several thematic and aesthetic preoccupations with Beckett. O’Doherty’s intermediality by contrast though is indicative of potential futures, and does not correspond with the sense of decay in Beckett’s medial practice. The sense of intermediality as having to do with the relation between media pervades a number of the essays gathered here. Jonathan Bignell’s analysis of *Eh Joe* in its televisual context is grounded in an understanding of intermediality as a process of intersecting and interweaving of media. In *Eh Joe*, he identifies aspects of the conventions of a stage play, a radio drama and a film. Bignell’s central argument is that “attention to intermediality shows that the rhetorical strategies of Beckett’s television drama are constituted as much by processes of intersection and hybridity as by individuation and differentiation.” While his focus is mainly on television, his essay demonstrates the ways in which that medium has significant intermedial relationships with radio, film, radio and relatively non-technological forms of media, including theatre and visual art. Both in terms of its aesthetics and its reception, *Eh Joe* is a work that offers Bignell routes into thinking through the very nature of mediation itself, allowing him to present all media as characterised by hybridity. Galina Kiryushina, engaging with what Wolf would term an example of “intermedial transposition” (2005, 254), uncovers an example of such hybridity in Beckett’s later short prose *The Lost Ones*. She traces Beckett’s interaction with documentary cinema form to show how the author’s engagement with certain medial forms leaves its mark and trace in his subsequent work. Taking Beckett’s response to his viewing of Robert Flaherty’s docudrama *Man of Aran* as its starting point, her essay deftly connects the anthropological eye of documentary cinema with the “attempted supremacy” of the narrator of *The Lost Ones*, in order to suggest that the text is less about its objects of study, as in the figures of the cylinder, and more about the narrator and the act of narrative mediation itself.

Other essays demonstrate the sorts of intermedial interweavings taking place within adaptations of Beckett’s work. Catherine Laws’s essay addresses the relationship between Beckett’s writing and music, suggesting that the work is “often already intermedial in its exploitation of the complex and ambiguous relationship between language, musicality and meaning.” Her central question is to do with what occurs when musicians work with, or otherwise respond to, Beckett’s texts. Live performance is a feature here, as she discusses John Tilbury’s performance of a musical version of *Worstward Ho*, a piece which

comprises a piano composition performed together with a recording of Tilbury reading from the text. Although primarily focused on textual interchange between music and writing, Laws's description of Tilbury performing the piece in his 80s calls our attention to the nexus of text, musical adaptation, voice (recorded), and ageing body out of which this adaptation is formed. If Kiryushina's essay connected intermediality to the politics of representation and power, Laws's shows its relevance for considerations of identity and selfhood. Tilbury's musical version of *Worstward Ho* draws out, as Laws puts it, a "fragile, complex mapping of fractured subjectivity."

Intermediality in the context of live performance offers a rich resource for describing and understanding the necessarily intermedial nature of that form. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt understand the intermedial as "a space where the boundaries soften—and we are in-between and within a mixing of spaces, media and realities"; they show how intermedia becomes a process of transformation in and through performance (12). McMullan's, Johnson's and Balazs Rapcsak's essays each reference this understanding of intermediality. Rapcsak focuses on the fundamentally medial and mediated nature of *Breath* (1969), with its reliance on a "recorded vagitus" (Beckett 1984, 211), and, taking the history of the script's composition as its starting point, he traces a more negative instance of performance's transformation of text: the tensions generated between script and performance in Kenneth Tynan's reworking of *Breath* for *Oh Calcutta*, his 1960s erotic revue. In McMullan's essay, theatre is, as in Chapple and Kattenbelt's understanding, a hypermedium, a "space where the art forms of theatre, opera and dance meet, interact and integrate with the media of cinema, television, video and the new technologies; creating profusions of texts, inter-texts, inter-media and spaces in-between" (24). The 2014 production of *Fizzles* by Company SJ which McMullan discusses seems to embody this notion with utmost clarity, combining and interweaving as it does live bodies with recorded voiceover and filmed material. As McMullan reflects, "The intermedial interchange here definitely augmented my perception in disorienting and uncanny ways, and intensified the sense of isolation and desolation of the wandering figure." Interestingly, both McMullan and Johnson in their respective essays discuss prose adaptations. Johnson's essay considers three adaptations of *How It Is*, and in so doing considers the challenge of "unperformability" that this text presents. While McMullan's critical reading of *Fizzles*, together with a 1996 American Repertory Theatre Company live film studio production of *Eh Joe*, demonstrates how intermediality offers a critical vocabulary for understanding contemporary work such as this, the practical focus of Johnson's essay seems to point towards an ethos of dramaturgy and adaptation, in which intermedial or cross-medial experimentation might be both in step with the

principles of the text while at the same time creating something new and experimental. All three of these essays, McMullan's, Johnson's and Rapcsak's, wade directly into the territory of what it means to adapt Beckett's work across media. If the latter's account offers a cautionary tale of what can and has gone wrong in the process of such adaptation, the former two authors document work that might be seen as at the cutting edge of Beckett performance. These essays offer serious consideration of what it will mean to perform Beckett's work in the coming decades. Their analyses of their chosen case studies exemplify how this might be done and show how such work is likely to be marked by the use of emergent technologies of performance and mediation.

What such intermedial approaches show therefore also is the way in which Beckett's work offers grounds for thinking through how media is shaped by and shapes technology. What we find in Beckett's oeuvre is a body of work that seems to look both forward and backward in terms of its technological experimentation, while presenting formal and medium-specific precision. Reflecting a lifetime of working across multiple media forms, literature, theatre, radio, film, television, David Tucker's essay in this collection traces a hitherto unknown history of Beckett's interaction with film after his one somewhat unsuccessful foray into the world of filmmaking in the 1960s. Tucker uncovers the history of a planned but never completed re-make of *Film* by Damien Pettigrew in the early 1980s. Tucker's article details the kinds of medium-conscious changes and technical fixes Beckett proposed for the re-make. This essay marks a fascinating additional chapter in Beckett's interaction with filmmaking and reaffirms our sense of his sensitivity to and understanding of the form.

In many ways, Beckett's oeuvre is shown in these essays to embody multiple aspects of the discourses of intermediality that have emerged since Higgins first deployed the term. When Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx define intermedial performances as those that blur clear-cut distinctions between presence / absence, mediated / unmediated, life / death, real / virtual, visible / invisible they could easily be referring to examples from Beckett's oeuvre. Furthermore, they see these pairings not as opposites but rather as "axes," constituting and constructing each other, in a way which deconstructs "established cultural connotations normally assigned to either live or mediated performances" (221). Such a perspective speaks readily to Beckett's aesthetic practice of interweaving and transposing radiophonic voices, pictorial composition, narrative devices and technologies of mediation, and its ongoing contemporary manifestations in the worlds of theatre, visual and performance art, music, and filmic or digital media. The wide-ranging essays collected here offer extensive nuance and complexity of perspective on Beckett and media, grounded

in biography, aesthetics and medial theory. As Verhulst and Beloborodova conclude in the essay that opens this volume, whatever version of medial practice Beckett might be shown to have engaged in, whether adaptation or transmediality, multimediality and intermediality, these “are not mutually exclusive or irreconcilable processes in Beckett’s writing. Instead, they combine to fuel the continuous creative innovation that marks his post-war work.” The volume as a whole captures the spirit of intermediality pervading Beckett’s work, and offers modes of thinking and approaches that will serve to illuminate emergent inter-medial art practices that engage with its multiple medial forms.

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