Beckett and Contemporary Aesthetic Form

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This special issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* originates in a symposium on Beckett and Artists' Cinema and Screenwork that took place at The University of Reading on 23 June 2023, showcasing works by John Gerrard (*Bone Work (Gulf of Mexico)*, 2022), Stan Douglas (*Vidéo*, 2007) and Duncan Campbell (*O Joan No*, 2006; *Bernadette*, 2008). The event drew inspiration from two other sources. First of all, the Beckett Creative Fellowships initiative, funded by the University's Beckett Research Centre, which appoints creative artists of all kinds to engage with the extraordinary archive of Beckett's working notebooks, manuscripts, letters and other materials that are preserved in the University's Special Collections. It was under the aegis of this Fellowship programme that visual artist Duncan Campbell took part in the roundtable with Derval Tubridy, Anna McMullan, Jivitesh Vashisht, Jonathan Bignell, David Houston Jones and Anthony Paraskeva. Second of all, the publication of *Beckett's Afterlives* (2023), an essay collection edited by Jonathan Bignell, Anna McMullen and Pim Verhulst that examines creative re-imaginings of his work in dance, opera, visual art, installation, site-specific and multimedial performance, webseries, etc. It was launched at the symposium and several of the contributors were present to take part in the lively discussions on the day. Some of them also feature in this dossier, alongside newly invited contributors and practitioners.

The symposium, the fellows programme and *Beckett's Afterlives* attest to the continuing influence that Beckett still has on contemporary cultural production, whether that be in visual and screen-based art, film, theatre, performance, dance, music, fiction or other aesthetic forms. This influence has been recognised, for example in monographs such as Stephen Watt's *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (2009), Peter Boxall's *Since Beckett* (2009), Nicholas Johnson and Jonathan Heron's *Experimental Beckett* (2020), James Baxter's *Samuel Beckett's Legacies in American Fiction* (2021), or essay collections like the 'Filiations & Connexions' / 'Filiations & Connecting Lines' issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* (23, 2011; eds. Yann Mével, Dominique Rabaté and Sjef Houppermans), *Beckett in Popular Culture* (2015; eds. P. J. Murphy and Nick Pawliuk), *Samuel Beckett and Contemporary Art* (2017; eds. Robert Reginio, David Houston-Jones and Katherine Weiss) or

Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture (2019; eds. Paul Stewart and David Pattie), to name only a few of the more recent publications that investigate this phenomenon. Together they testify to the many creative exchanges that can occur between Beckett's work and that of other artists, in whatever form.

It is our firm conviction that one key criterion in assessing the work of those who would claim an affinity with Beckett is whether that relationship is dialectical in nature. That is to say, given the historical distance that now holds between Beckett's moment and our own, any real influence will operate in two directions: from the past to the present, of course, but also, and less often acknowledged, from the present to the past. For us as critics, it is one of the many pleasures of working on Beckett to have our scholarly preconceptions constantly challenged by the interests and enthusiasms of our creative contemporaries and the sometimes surprising material (from the Reading archive, for example) but also by the non-canonical texts they have responded to. In this way writers, artists and musicians constantly reinvent Beckett by tuning into elements we may have overlooked, or by looking at them anew. Such creative 'respondees' might be thought of as *bricoleurs* in the Levi-Straussian sense, agents who take what they need, less concerned with the tried and tested canonical qualities that we critics often feel obliged to acknowledge than with what can be useful to answer the pressing demands of the moment.

Needless to say, this does not mean that all contemporary adaptations, appropriations or invocations of Beckett's work are successful or worth our time and consideration. Surely, most readers of this journal, with its long-standing tradition of performance reviews, can think of opportunistic forays into his catalogue by writers or artists who are more concerned to secure the imprimatur of serious art than exhibiting any real feel for the work itself. Pointing out the latter is one of the tasks that Beckett's pervasive and continuing cultural presence demands of us as critics. More broadly, what is necessary is a sustained and rigorous consideration of the meaning, value and formal consequences of that presence for recent literary, visual and musical aesthetics. Or, indeed, for contemporary aesthetics *tout court*. Why, for example, Beckett and not Kafka? Why not Joyce or Proust? If we were to read Beckett's repeated return as a symptom of the present, then what does that say about the patient under scrutiny? These are some of the questions we seek to answer in this dossier.

The essays that are assembled here construct a coherent subset of Beckett's works. Most of the texts mentioned come from one particular period, the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, also a time when Beckett himself branched out into film and television after radio, and became more closely involved in creative reworkings of his texts. In the order of their staging

or publication, the most important of these are *Play*, *Film*, *Not I*, *Breath*, *Ghost Trio*, *The Lost Ones*, *Quad* and *Imagine Dead Imagine*. It is worth pointing out that the earlier, prewar Beckett is largely absent, as are what might be thought of as the classic, canonical works: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and the 'trilogy' of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Nor do we encounter the highly distilled, somewhat elegiac and sometimes less aggressively experimental later fictions from *Company* to *Stirrings Still*. It is what could be called a 'long Sixties' Beckett that we find here. This might well be a result of the predominantly visual bent of the issue. Had we cast the net a little wider to include more literary responses, e.g. Lazlo Kraznohorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989) or Jon Fosse's *Septology* (2019–22), then the earlier and later prose works would certainly have been more relevant. Having said that, a consideration of the grouping we have allows us to say something about Beckett's attraction *across* aesthetic forms: the zone of aesthetic intersection where the various contemporary arts meet.

We can briefly point to at least one striking common denominator. Beckett's mid-1960s and 1970s works pitch their own formal materials against each other. That is to say, it is often from internal contrasts between the material forms they deploy that these works derive their force. Such contrasts might include those between colour and monochrome, sound and image, image and word, speech and music, performance and text, theatre and television, the literary and the generic, etc. So far, then, so conventionally modernist: they explore their own medium specificity in the classic Greenbergian sense. But do they really, or only, assuming that each of them is in fact coherent and unified? Rather, there seems to be something about these texts that makes one aesthetic form always gravitate towards and invite comparison with others: plays that remember paintings, films that destroy photographs, fictions that obsess over architecture, television that stages chamber music. What is more, in one way or another, they are almost all concerned with, and cognisant of, the impact of technology and the history of their forms.

The publication of Beckett's selected letters has made it abundantly clear that we should think of his work in broader terms than just the genres or media he practised during his career. Beckett's involvement in other artists' adaptations of his work, however begrudgingly at times, exposed him to many other aesthetic forms. Take, for example, an animated puppet film of *The Lost Ones* made by Ernst Reinboth in 1975 (Beckett, 2016, 385), which not only resonates with Kleist-inflected prose texts like *Company* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*, written over the following years, but also with Company SJ's 2018 adaptation of the former, which features an animated puppet on stage (McMullan, 2023), and indeed with Dead

Centre's *Beckett's Room* (2019), discussed in this dossier. Also, on 5 October 1965, Beckett wrote to Barbara Bray: 'Did work on *All That Fall* M[rs] R[ooney] represented by an animated line. Looked at nothing else' (2014, 677). On the one hand, this activity anticipates posthumous adaptations of the radio play like Pan Pan's staging, which visually represents the characters' voices in varying light intensities that respond to alternating levels of sound (see Johnson and Heron 2020; Duane 2023). On the other hand, it brings Beckett closer to popular culture, with precedents such as the 'Meet the Sound Track' intermission from Walt Disney's animation film *Fantasia* (1940). Inspired by the strip on the side of photographic film, where a pattern in the emulsion records information on dialogue, narration, music and sound effects, it visualises the frequencies of the soundtrack as a vertically animated line changing colour. By thus embodying an entity that could be heard but not seen, without entirely revealing it, this strategy resembles some of the suggestions Beckett made for stagings of his radio plays (see Beckett, 2014, 63, 102). The exact nature of the project he was working on, whether it ever came to fruition and who he was doing it for, is not clear. But this little-known reimagining of *All That Fall* reminds us that his interests in aesthetic forms ranged widely, well beyond now 'old' technological media like radio, television and film or the classic triad of poetry, prose and theatre, but also music.

Draft versions, part of what S. E. Gontarski has dubbed Beckett's 'grey canon' (2006), including unfinished and unpublished works, broaden the horizon still further. Building on an abandoned double-act called 'Mime du rêveur A & B' (1956), in which Beckett experimented with a *mise en abyme* structure whereby one mime would be embedded in a second mime (see Van Hulle and Weller, 2018, 192–4), he eventually revived this idea for the TV play *Nacht und Träume* (1982), but not until after it had taken the form of yet another terminated and discarded venture, usually referred to as his 'Film Vidéo-Cassette [projet]'. This is the work-in-progress title on four pages, dated November 1972, at the back of a notebook kept at the University of Reading (UoR MS 2928). As Mark Nixon describes the basic premise of the piece:

> The plan is based on two films, 'Film I' and 'Film II', each of which depict the same bare room, containing a door, a window, two chairs and a television set. In 'Film I' we see a woman F1 sitting on a chair waiting for someone who does not arrive. 'Film II' shows a woman F2 going through a routine of preparations before sitting down to watch a video recording of 'Film I'. (2009, 33)

As much as *Krapp's Last Tape* had been indebted to Beckett's experience of seeing in action a tape recorder at the BBC's Paris office, this new 'first record of a creative idea', as Nixon aptly calls it (33), may very well have been sparked by his presence in television studios at the BBC and the SDR during the mid-to-late 1960s for the rehearsal sessions and recordings of *Eh Joe* on videotape (36). As the title and description show, the piece mixes various art forms, media or devices: film, television (screens), video (cassettes), a camera and recording equipment. This makes it one of Beckett's most multimedial works, which has prompted Nixon to view it in the context of contemporary video artists like Nam June Paik or Bruce Nauman (34, 35). However, there is also a playful, even gimmicky nature to Beckett's piece, implied in the last word of the title, which could well be 'asticot' ('leg-puller' or 'teaser') instead of 'projet'. After suggesting the identity between F1 and F2, by way of juxtaposed close-ups and mirror reflections, Beckett briefly contemplates introducing F3 who watches F2 watch F1 (40). This sense of seriality, the piece potentially running on ad infinitum, is not only in keeping with the permutational nature of Beckett's later work, but also shows his use of technology to achieve certain aesthetic effects. And, even as he is playing around with a relatively novel piece of hardware, the VCR, Beckett already seems aware of its limitations. The reduplication of Fs – reminiscent of the abbreviation for fast-forwarding (FF), previously explored in the stage play *Krapp's Last Tape* – would have overcrowded the small TV screen or required computational power to process the mass of data.

In particular this repetition – contrary to the linear progression of *Film* and other media works – relates Beckett to video art and digital installations, often shown on a continuous loop. This potential for re-watching, at different starting points and not in isolation but juxtaposed, is what Canadian video artist Stan Douglas seized on when he united *Film* and the TV plays in the same physical space for his *Samuel Beckett: Teleplays* exhibition, held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1988, framing Beckett as a video artist. Although it was not featured in the exhibition or mentioned anywhere in the catalogue, Beckett's 'Film Vidéo-Cassette' project is evoked in Douglas's *Vidéo* (2007), which is a creative reworking of *Film* that replaces magnetic tape with digital recording and a CCTV camera. Like its two Beckettian predecessors, *Vidéo* aesthetically foregrounds its own medium, as Mieke Bal explains:

> Information from the Douglas studio about the production of *Vidéo* revealed that the grainy quality was due to the fact that the gain on the HD video camera was set to +12 dB for the entire shoot. This gives the camera three extra stops of exposure, but it

> introduces the noise from the CCD [Charge-coupled device, i.e. the chip that converts a photographic image into an electric signal] – it is always there, even when there is no light, as if the imaging panel were seeing itself seeing. The three colours – red, green, and blue – are the primary colours video uses to make all colours. (2008, 69–70n15)

Going beyond *Film* in its medial self-awareness, the specks, which swarm the picture at all times, relate *Vidéo*, a work shot in colour, to *Quadrat I*, whose somewhat un-Beckettian palette of white, yellow, blue and red – contrasting with the typical monochrome of *Quadrat II* and the other screen works – has, in turn, been connected to 'the technicalities of colour signal processing' (Murphet, 2021, 159). As such, in more than one way, Douglas has placed Beckett squarely in the middle of a much larger discussion on form, genre, media and technology, far exceeding the borders of his already quite versatile oeuvre, which is part of the reason why the work of this Canadian visual artist features so prominently in our dossier.

Duncan Campbell's fifteen-minute *O Joan No* (2006), also displayed at the June 2023 Symposium, is another fascinating example of the way Beckett lives on in contemporary screen art. From the beginning of the piece there is very little sense of location, period or persona, no contextual information whatsoever. The viewer is immersed in a void with few referents except a perplexed and perplexing set of clearly vocal sounds that the audience hears as feminine. The most overt references to Beckett come in the first five minutes, when spotlights sweep down and seem to trigger these highly affective emissions. *Play* is the most obvious source here, in particular its stage directions' insistence that the characters' '*speech is provoked by a spotlight*' (Beckett, 2009, 53). The TV play *Eh Joe* is also evoked in the title, the male voice now silenced with only the female one sounding, both disembodied. As the piece continues, different forms of light sources appear, each one seeming to stimulate a series of sighs, yelps, screams, laughter, whistles as well as a range of other non-verbal sounds. Blue and red discs or spots flit across the screen. Often these light sources hesitate, bisected by the edge of the screen. In this sense, *O Joan No* carries through a modernist project of creating a piece that works with the most basic materials of its medium, in this case celluloid, light and pure sound. Instead of opposing a nominally real, historical space to the material space of representation, Campbell pitches two forms of representation against each other. Hence, *O Joan No* moves constantly between the three-dimensional theatrical space of Beckett's *Play*, on the one hand, and the two-dimensional surface of minimalist painting, film and the (television) screen, on the other. It is both formal and historical in this sense,

mobilising modernist means while being aware that those means are now at play in a different era – and an entirely different artistic arena.

We start off the special issue with some broader theoretical reflection as well as a case study by Nicholas Johnson and Céline Thobois. Proposing the botanical metaphor of 'grafting' and the adjoining image of a 'brown' canon, Johnson and Thobois analyse Dead Centre's 'play without actors' *Beckett's Room* (2019) as an example that complicates the notion of 'adaptation' or even 'appropriation'. Instead, they offer a creative continuum that functions as a reciprocal 'ecosystem'. Inspired by – and in fact emerging from a project that sought to stage – Beckett's first completed play *Eleutheria*, it is also heavily indebted to the author's biography in a manner that investigates the boundaries of aesthetic form as well as the common artistic practices of stage performance. Relying almost completely on sound, lighting, projection and various forms of deftly conceived animation for its effect, it additionally draws on Beckett plays like *Breath* to investigate theatrical affect achieved through a residual human presence by proxy.

In his '"A kind of scanner": Tracking the Work of the Forensic in John Gerrard's *Bone Work (Gulf of Mexico)*', David Houston Jones' expands on his essay in *Beckett's Afterlives* by returning to digital installations. Gerrard exploits the increasingly ubiquitous technology of the game engine to create closed, permutational worlds that are inhabited by remote and seemingly mechanised subjects echoing the climate of mid-1960s Beckett pieces ranging from *Quad* to *Ghost Trio*. Drawing on his book *Installation Art and the Practice of Archivalism* (2016), in particular the notion of the forensic, Houston Jones links the activist and interventionist work of Eyal Weizman to the equally public nature of Gerrard's work. He investigates *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *The Lost Ones* in terms of Weizman's 'Thing-Image', a boundary-disturbing concept that stresses the deep implication of visual regimes with material processes and actions. Showing how this registers in the Beckett texts listed above, Houston Jones goes on to investigate the links between them and *Bone Work*.

Derval Tubridy's 'Toward a Politics of Vocalic Expression: Beckett and Video Art' is a highly focused account of the profound impact of Beckett's *Not I*, in particular the TV version made for the BBC (1977) with its central, inflated image of a speaking mouth, on the work of a long series of important artists from 1969 to 2019. Building on Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero, Tubridy persuasively ascribes the remarkable persistence of Beckett's image to the way it performs the act of articulation itself. More than this, she argues that all of the other artists involved, in their different ways, seize on this quality in order to explore

the political nature of public speech in its relation to the body, gender, race and power. Tubridy considers each artwork and shows in detail the specific ways in which the basic generative matrix of the mouth-image is recontextualised, challenged, extended or, in Mona Hatoum's case, violently negated.

Pim Verhulst explores Beckett's debt to cinematic history by reinterpreting *Film* in light of Lionel Rogosin's documentary film *On the Bowery* (1956). Both set in New York and sharing a realistic backstory for their two protagonists – Ray Salyer and O – their potential interrelation challenges the abstract result desired by Beckett. This is further complicated by Ross Lipman's high-definition restoration of the picture quality as part of his *Notfilm* (2015) project, as well as the found footage of the opening street scene and production photographs by Steve Schapiro included on the DVD and Blu-Ray versions. Verhulst goes on to investigate the legacy of *Film* in Stan Douglas's *Vidéo* (2007) and how it invests Beckett's work with new political-historical meaning in the twenty-first century. By assessing *Vidéo* as a creative response to both *Film* and William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971), the article traces how these works variously render the notion of perception, cognisant of their own aesthetic forms and related technologies while assimilating Hollywood cinema and jazz music.

Conor Carville's essay goes on to interrogate the ways in which two Black artists (Stan Douglas and Steve McQueen) and one Black writer (Simon Okotie) replay Beckett's work, to illustrate how all three inherit and disinherit him at the same time. Using Tina Post's notion of the aesthetics of Black inexpression as a theoretical point of departure for all three case studies, Carville analyses how McQueen's installation *7th Nov.*, 2001 interacts with but also transforms *Not I*. He then proceeds to consider Stan Douglas's *Vidéo* (2007), which brings Beckett's 1965 *Film* into a dialogue with Orson Welles' 1962 screen adaption of Kafka's *The Trial*. Douglas's juxtaposition of these two works from the early 1960s is presented as an intervention in debates around modernism's legacy, in particular Adorno's critical modernism. Finally, Okotie's text is read with a close eye on its formal devices in relation to Beckett's late prose.

The special issue concludes with a creative writing contribution by Okotie, an excerpt from an ongoing more extensive work of fiction that was begun during his Beckett Fellowship at Reading's Special Collections. 'Peering Out of the Deadlight' clearly displays the influence of Beckett's prose, and yet holds it at an intermedial and historical distance by describing in prose a theatrical adaptation (by Mabou Mines) *The Lost Ones*. Not only that but the narrative is restricted to the few seconds before the show actually begins, as a late-

comer desperately seeks to find an empty seat in a cramped auditorium while being pursued by a mysterious other. This attention to the literal, physical emplacement of an audience-member suggests a text that is very concerned with perspective, orientation as well as the labour of aesthetic and canonical interpretation. Okotie's robustly architectonic sentences mirror the Beckettian concerns of the text with space while also delivering the kind of formal ambiguities that one would expect from his late prose.[1]

'Peering Out of the Deadlight' builds on Okotie's Harold Absolon trilogy – *Whatever Happened to Harold Absolon* (2012), *In the Absence of Absolon* (2017), *After Absolon* (2020), all published by Salt. It combines 'the detective story as existential crisis' familiar from *Molloy* with the narrative forestalling of *Tristram Shandy* (Lezard, 2017) and the obsessively repetitive minutiae of *Watt*. Expressed in the formal rigour of a late Beckett, with short chapters that often fizzle out, Okotie's work also operates on a larger scale, stretched out across multiple volumes with footnotes, thus blowing up the distinction between microfiction and macrofiction. This puts him in the company of – and brings Beckett's work into dialogue with – contemporary authors such as Jean Echenoz and Régis Jauffret in France or Mark Z. Danielewski and David Foster Wallace in the US. At the same time, it draws our attention to the interconnectedness of Beckett's own *oeuvre*, despite its great diversity in aesthetic forms.

Notes

1. A companion piece to this one was published in *Tolka* in the summer of 2024. You can hear Okotie read that text, alongside a reading by Beckett Fellow and award-winning novelist Claire-Louise Bennett, at an event at the Calder Bookshop, London, archived on the Beckett Research Centre website: https://research.reading.ac.uk/beckett/simon-okotie/simon-okotie-reflections/.

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