

Research Project

Beckett's Media System: A Comparative Study in Multimediality

Third-party funded project

Project title Beckett's Media System: A Comparative Study in Multimediality

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“Beckett's Media System: A Comparative Study in Multimediality” is a 3-year project that aims to explore and describe the dynamics of Beckett's media system. Technology shapes Beckett's output in crucial ways on three levels: it plays a pivotal role in the production of his work, appears prominently on the diegetic plane of his plays, and shapes the textual and medial organization of his texts and productions. Yet it has only recently been recognized that Beckett is a pre-eminent multimedia artist whose innovations influence media art to the present day. The excitement of this recognition is coupled with a challenge posed by the realization that much of the technology, which the aesthetics of Beckett's media works depend on, belongs to the past. Since the reflection on the effects of media technologies on culturally established norms of representation define Beckett's work in fundamental ways, this historical distance creates the need for technologically informed re-readings of a representative cross-section of Beckett's work in several media. At the same time, the significance of the project can be understood in broader terms. For Beckett is a privileged observer of a medial transition whose subtle artistic negotiations of newly emerging systems of cultural exchange, which also define our present, offer unique insights into how the epistemological and anthropological parameters of culture change. Our project applies a comprehensive multimedial perspective to Beckett's work, combining media archaeology with close reading, transformational analysis, and media- and genre-historical contextualization. Our main analytical focus is on Beckett's creative combination of varying medial configurations and communication paradigms, including writing, electromagnetic sound recording, radio transmission, cinematography, and audiovisual broadcasting. In staging these combinations, Beckett reflects upon and enacts the radical impact that medial and technological developments had on basic human activities such as reading, speaking, listening, seeing, and remembering. In Beckett's plays, dismembered organs (Mouth), disembodied human faculties (Voice), media fields (Music, Word), and apparatuses (Tape) are dramatic characters that attain a status equal to human beings. Beckett not only thematizes technology and uses it in the production of his work; he also abuses apparatuses in the sense that he disrupts their functioning by staging processes of interference (remediation, mimicry, hybridization) between them to expose how they shape perception and cognition. In the framework of our project, we analyze a range of materials available in The Samuel Beckett Collection of the University of Reading Library, some of which have not been discussed by scholars, while this body of material has not been researched from a sustained media-theoretical perspective yet. Much of the project's innovative thrust stems from its sustained effort to bring together some of the most powerful voices in contemporary anglophone Beckett scholarship and German media analysis (especially media archaeology but also Luhmannian systems theory and historical epistemology) to think anew the interplay between media, materiality, aisthesis, and the discursive processes in Beckett's work. Our ultimate aim is to rethink Beckett's oeuvre as a complex, dynamic media system.

Keywords literary studies, screen works, media archaeology, Samuel Beckett, multimediality, stage plays, materiality, radio plays, mediality

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