Research Project

Samuel Beckett's Media Art

Third-party funded project

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Over the past decade critics have increasingly recognized Beckett's significance as a media artist, but the contours of this designation have remained rather vague. Just how innovative and how radical was Samuel Beckett as a media artist? What scientific developments and technological blueprints inspired Beckett's media aesthetic? And how urgently does its increasing technological obsoleteness call for a reassessment of this work that has nevertheless lost none of its power to fascinate scholars, to enthral audiences, and to influence new generations of media artists?

The project is driven by the conviction that the coexistence of Beckett's literary production, his output in radio and TV, and his experimentation with machine language, coding, and digitality is an essential characteristic of this work that shouldn't be played down in favour of a compartmentalized analysis of these fields, but that cannot be narrativized into a logical sequence of formal experiments either. Insightful as they are, accounts that trace interart influences within the 'oeuvre', the third approach dominating the critical discourse, have also left this particular question unanswered. A series of case studies will serve to test and nuance the hypothesis that Beckett's work represents, among other things, a uniquely subtle artistic negotiation of three successive technological and cultural paradigms: literary culture and the humanist tradition, analogue media and the age of telecommunications, and cybernetics and digitality. The analyses will explore the array of aesthetic strategies, not least textual operations, that produce entanglements between these three different models of signification. With a special focus on the theatrical scripts, the project aims to reconceptualize the Beckettian 'media play', a term conventionally – and perhaps unreflectingly – reserved for the pieces Beckett wrote for radio, film, television, and video. Somewhat provocatively, then, the project addresses the problem of Beckett's 'media art' in the singular, arguing that its generative tensions cannot be neatly mapped onto its radiophonic, filmic, televisual, literary, and theatrical instantiations. Drawing on genetic criticism (facilitated by the ongoing Beckett Digital Manuscript Project), production history, and the recently published letters, the project also looks at the interaction between this work and a changing media ecology, tracing, to give just one particularly intriguing example, Beckett's ingenuity in manipulating various media channels in order to control the reception of his work.

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