Adaptation and convergence: Beckett on film

3

Adaptation and convergence: *Beckett on Film*

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The *Beckett on Film* project, completed in 2000, originated in the Dublin Gate Theatre's 1991 staging of all nineteen of Beckett's theatre works and led to the adaptations being screened at film festivals and as television broadcasts, sold as DVD box sets and distributed via online video streaming.[1] Because of its scale, *Beckett on Film* is perhaps the most salient ever example of adapting Beckett. This chapter argues that these evolutions of the project are more significant than simply repackaging the content produced in one medium for distribution in another. Rather, they work with and reflect on the borders between mediums, and the ways that creative works fit into new medial environments. By studying these transitions, *Beckett on Film* can be seen not as a fixed text (or collection of texts), but as a mobile and mutable work that changes in relation to medium and audience, with different spatial and temporal specificities across the history of its adaptations. The chapter debates these questions mainly by tracing the British and Irish stories of how its makers the Blue Angel production company, the Irish broadcaster RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann) and the British Channel 4 television channel framed *Beckett on Film*. The chapter addresses its genesis, production, scheduling for cinema and its television screenings addressed to specialist, general and then educational audiences. It also considers how the project's adaptation into the 'new' media of DVD and online video framed the DVD as a cultural asset and a prestige collectable, aligning it with discourses of taste and connoisseurship.

The completed films of Beckett's plays are not the primary objects of analysis here. Instead, the focus is on the processes of their production and distribution, and the interstitial and paratextual materials that accompanied them, because these shaped what *Beckett on Film* was perceived to be. A proliferation of press releases, news coverage, product packaging, interviews and behind the scenes footage, as well as several associated print publications, framed, targeted and interpreted the *Beckett on Film* productions. The appropriate metaphor, picking up on the Darwinian associations of adaptation, might be that the project was designed to fit a certain niche in the audio-visual ecosystem, and over time it expanded, contracted and was retrospectively modified in order to fit into new, changed environmental conditions. The point is not to critique the ambition and achievement of this expensively mounted, comprehensive series of Beckett adaptations, featuring international stars. It is not perverse that it changed and became something else. Indeed, critical investigation of the genesis and afterlife of the series can shed light on how Beckett's work was renegotiated in the twenty-first century in order to better survive. This chapter argues that *Beckett on Film* has been agile, resilient and adaptable in ways that suited an emergent culture of media convergence.

Adaptation, authorship, text and medium

There are (at least) two axes for the analysis of adaptation. As Sarah Cardwell (2018) has explored, adaptation implies the production of sequential versions based on an original, in a temporal and relatively linear progression. Alternatively, adaptation can describe an intertextual, intermedial, transmedial field in which a work undergoes or results from an expanding, spatial spreading-out where some of its components are reconfigured in different guises but remain recognisably the same. This chapter argues that *Beckett on Film* has aspects of both the linear and the spatial dimensions, which is the secret of its success. Of course, the

films are adaptations of prior works: Beckett's plays. The project is also fitted to the spatial axis of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008), in which audio-visual texts are designed for, and consumed via, multiple platforms and devices at the same time. In the era of convergence, hitherto separate media technologies come together, so that a portable phone can play radio or TV, or access an online newspaper, for example. Films and television programmes are available online, and live broadcasts and DVD recordings are supplemented by additional content that can be accessed either via the television set or via the screen of another device like a tablet computer. What made this transformation possible was digitisation, whereby both production and distribution are carried out by digital means, making hitherto different mediums compatible.

Because of its associations with mutability and transformation, convergence implicitly questions ideas of textual identity, self-sufficiency and stability. At the same time as enabling Beckett's plays to shift from medium to medium, convergence might separate them from their origins in, and dependence on, a theatrical provenance. The signalling of theatricality in some of the *Beckett on Film* adaptations, such as *Catastrophe* (directed by David Mamet), shot on location in a dilapidated theatre, can be seen as a recuperative strategy that addresses this issue. Wilton's Music Hall, originally built as a sumptuous palace of entertainment in 1859, had fallen into dereliction by the time it was used for *Catastrophe* (Wilton's Music Hall, 2021). Its Victorian stage had appeared in films and video to introduce reflexive discourses about performance, including in the biopic *Chaplin* (1992), in Frankie Goes to Hollywood's pop video *Relax* (1984) and when Deborah Warner directed Fiona Shaw in a staged reading of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1997). To use Wilton's as a production location was to invoke theatricality in ruins, while also calling on theatre performance's liveness and bodily materiality, whose power relationships *Catastrophe* instantiates and explores on screen. Because convergence means moving across and between

forms of expression, a work can be potentially deconstructive and experimental by engaging in dialogue with them. The adaptation of *Play* (directed by Anthony Minghella) in the *Beckett on Film* project does this too, through allusions to the conventions of cinema and visual art as well as theatre (Bignell, 2009: 33–7). A soundstage at Pinewood Studios houses a large set whose design invokes artistic images of hell, the staging of *Play* in the theatre and the mechanical apparatus of filmmaking, all at the same time.

The places where artworks are made condition and enable their meanings, and the properties of specific spaces and diverse locations in *Beckett on Film* are important to its significance. It used convergent facilities that were routinely rented out, short-term, for both cinema and television production, rather than being the established production base of a large institution (such as the BBC's Television Centre or studio backlots in Hollywood). The most-used production base was Ardmore Studios, a major studio site in Ireland (Screen Ireland, 2021). RTÉ's most popular TV programme, the soap opera *Fair City* (1989-present), had been shot there until 1994, and previously its studios had been used on big-budget films for the international market.[2] The Dublin-set film *Angela's Ashes* (1999) used the studios for its interior scenes shortly before the large soundstages, equipped with cyclorama backdrops, housed *Beckett on Film*. *Not I* was shot at Shepperton studios near London, where its actor Julianne Moore, director Neil Jordan and producer Stephen Wolley had just made *The End of the Affair* (1999), a romantic drama based on Graham Greene's eponymous novel (Pinewood Group, 2021). The huge studio complex was being used for productions including *102 Dalmations* (2000), *Gladiator* (2000) and Channel 4's television sitcom *Black Books* (2000-4). In planning how to realise the *Beckett on Film* adaptations in concrete, spatial terms, Moloney and his team chose production sites that expressed ideas of medium specificity, and also sites that had adapted to the era of media convergence and were used for cinema, television and video projects.

What holds *Beckett on Film* together as an adaptation, signalling it, precisely, as adaptation, is Beckett's name.[3] The very title indicates that *Beckett on Film* is authorised by Beckett's authorial brand, and the entire spoken text of each published play is delivered in its film adaptation. This completeness and fidelity were the prime conditions the project's producers had to satisfy to get copyright permission to adapt the plays. The issue of rights invites us to consider creative work as property that can have a persistent identity across time and across different realisations, because it is owned by its author (or their estate in this case) (Bignell, 2015). Property rights provide some stability across porous media boundaries in the shifting landscape of convergence.

Since Beckett's spoken text is the basis for the *Beckett on Film* productions, plays that have no dialogue can push at the boundaries of adaptation. These plays' intertextual fields can spread out further when there are no words to which they are bound. For John Frow, the 'identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading' (1990: 46). When Damien Hirst placed surgical equipment in the shape of a swastika among the detritus that the camera swoops over in his adaptation of *Breath*, it is an intertextual motif that results from and leads to a whole network of interpretations (Hüser, 2011). In the adaptation of *Act without Words II*, directed by Enda Hughes, animated actors seem to recreate a 1920s slapstick film short, recalling Beckett's fascination with silent cinema and vaudeville performance. Creators and audiences make intertexual and intermedial connections, and Beckett's audio-visual work was already intermedial from the beginning (Bignell, 2020). The *Beckett on Film* adaptations that are not constrained by the requirement to use Beckett's full text can more actively seize opportunities for rich intertextual allusion. Such exceptions draw greater attention to the strictures that *Beckett on Film* accepts when it proclaims itself an adaptation oriented around authorship and textual fidelity.

From stage to screen

The main originator of the project was Michael Colgan, director of The Gate theatre between 1984 and 2016. There he mounted classic plays featuring international stars.[4] In October 1991 Colgan produced The Gate's Beckett festival, nested within a broader Dublin Theatre Festival. It included productions in other media: RTÉ broadcast Beckett's radio dramas, readings from his novel *Malone Dies* and two of his dramas for television, *Eh Joe* and *... but the clouds...*. In subsequent years the theatre productions toured internationally to Beijing, London, Melbourne, New York and Toronto, for example. The Gate productions were a travelling cultural festival, an event which sought to raise the profiles of the Gate, of Beckett, and of Ireland and Irish culture in general. *Beckett on Film*, made shortly after the end of the 1999 tour, is not a record of the theatre productions like the videotapes of live performances collected for Britain's National Theatre Archive or the Theatre Archive in London's Victoria & Albert Museum. Nor are the films remountings of stage productions, such as were done by the BBC when actors, designer and stage props for a recent production were set up in a studio to make a television version of one of Beckett's theatre plays (Bignell, 2022). But when the *Beckett on Film* versions were made they were first screened at film festivals, events like the theatre festivals in which cultural value, national canons and international recognition were negotiated. *Beckett on Film* was in some ways a legacy of the Gate's Beckett extravaganza, an adaptation in the sense of a natural progression or successor.

In an interview for the film industry magazine *Netribution*, Colgan's collaborator, the Irish producer Alan Moloney, formerly of Parallel Films, recalled: 'It was slow to get going, in that people laughed at what we were trying to achieve, saying it couldn't be done. Then gradually one by one, word got out, and we got people interested, then attached. That in turn changed the perception of it.' (Moloney qtd. in Wistreich, 2000) The existing relationship

between Colgan and the Beckett Estate 'facilitated the deal' but Moloney found that 'one of the difficulties we had with financing it was convincing people that the way to do it was to do all of the plays, that there was no point in just financing some of them.' (qtd. in Wistreich, 2000) The profitability and practicality of the project were also challenged by the inherent tension between fidelity and artistic freedom: 'Obviously each director/producer team had complete control over casting, art direction, photography and so forth. Interpretation is not the right word, but they were visual interpretations. There was a lot of flexibility within that, but they weren't allowed to rewrite anything.' (Moloney qtd. in Wistreich, 2000) Given the different stagings and locations in *Beckett on Film*, it is not surprising that Wistreich asked Moloney about stylistic consistency. The project adapted the work of one author, but 'visually, they could do anything. You can see in each piece the personality of the director, in an acute way. There is a consistency in terms of the shape of the titles that open and close each of the films.' (Moloney qtd. in Wistreich, 2000) Common branding of the films became crucial as one of the few means to express the project's coherence, and even more so later when the films were packaged together as a DVD set.

The project was not financed in the same way as commercial cinema, since the £4.5 million budget excluded actors' and directors' fees: 'all of the directors and the cast worked on a favour-expenses basis, so there was an enormous amount of co-operation and a lot of goodwill that made it happen.' (Moloney qtd. in Wistreich, 2000) The films were shot intermittently for a full year, then some were shown at festivals in New York, Toronto and Venice before they were all screened in Dublin in February 2001. The launch was covered in RTÉ news bulletins that included extracts from a speech by the Director General of RTÉ, Joe Mullholland, and interviews with Colgan and the actor Michael Gambon (who starred in *Endgame*). The event was also reported internationally: *Irish America* magazine, for example, aimed at emigrés and US citizens claiming Irish ancestry, reported that 'the Irish

Film Center's two theaters were filled with fans eager to catch the premieres of cinematic versions of all 19 of Samuel Beckett's stage plays. Nearly every screening sold out well in advance.' ('Celebrating', 2001) In September 2001, the London launch was introduced by Harold Pinter at the Barbican, and the directors Conor McPherson and Enda Hughes were interviewed alongside screenings of their respective adaptations of *Endgame* and *Act without Words II*. For audiences, the launch was an event not so different from Colgan's theatre festival and was oriented around Beckett's profile as an Irish author. Such ambivalences can be seen throughout the project. *Beckett on Film* is both cinema and theatre, it is oriented around Beckett but also the films' different directors, Irish and international, and it is definitively faithful to, yet creatively adaptive of, Beckett's texts. Characteristically, RTÉ news's interview with Gambon was shot with a large photograph of Beckett looming over Gambon's shoulder (Fig. 1), and Gambon recalled 'you can't get a comma or a full stop wrong. Have to get it right. If you get it wrong, the estate would complain, so it's got to be very accurate. It was a tough order but I wouldn't have missed it'.[5] Beckett's authorship and his estate's authorisation of the productions provided discourses of coherence and value that legitimated the project's diverse approaches to adaptation and the films' diverse visual styles.

[INSERT IMAGE HERE, Bignell illus.tiff]

Fig. 1. Michael Gambon at the launch of *Beckett on Film*, on RTÉ news.

The films were made in collaboration with Tyrone Productions, a company with experience of producing television programmes and DVD video, using facilities in both Belfast and Dublin (Tyrone, 2021). The company made the video adaptations of the live stage show *Riverdance*, which became an internationally successful DVD showcasing Irish traditional dancing, and they went on to make the similar music and dance spectacular

Heartbeat of Home (2013). Tyrone Productions is closely connected with Irish broadcasters, making factual programmes, entertainment specials (like *Christmas Carols with The Priests*, 2013) and programmes in the Irish language. Resembling some of Tyrone's other work, *Beckett on Film* was positioned as an audio-visual event expressing Irish identity in a marketable way.

The branding of the *Beckett on Film* productions distinguishes them from conventional film adaptations, since they have a common title sequence, introductory music and graphic style, for example. These paratextual and interstitial elements are both specific to each film (naming its director, for example) but also similar to the other *Beckett on Film* adaptations. Selected films were grouped together at the Venice or Toronto Film Festivals, emphasising their unity. Film festivals are sales events as much as cultural ones, and *Beckett on Film* was being showcased to distributors for exhibition in different national territories, and for television screening, with the implicit invitation to show the films as a series or season of related works. Such seriality is associated much more with television than cinema, however, and a review of the adaptation of *Happy Days* for the cinema industry newspaper *Variety* expressed uncertainty about where the project belonged. This was 'probably an unfilmable play', in which

> Canadian director Patricia Rozema, faced with specifically theatrical material, does her best to open out the piece by filming it in a windswept desert landscape, with middling results. Pic [i.e., the movie] is more suited to the small screen than the large; it's the power of the dialogue and the emotions, and the agonizing truthfulness of the performance, that succeed here. (Stratton, 2000).

There was uncertainty about what *Beckett on Film* is, and *Variety* implicitly advised buyers that it would work better on television than in the cinema.

The legal entity behind the project was Blue Angel Films, a production company set up for the purpose and headed by Colgan and Moloney.[6] Between them, they had extensive contacts with Irish and international actors, directors and production staff. The other partners in the production were solely investors. The Irish Film Board (renamed Screen Ireland in 2018) was a government-funded organisation with a remit to support and promote Irish film and television production. This included bringing outside investment and foreign creative talent to Ireland, as *Beckett on Film* did, for economic as well as cultural reasons. The Board is closely associated with Culture Ireland, which promotes Irish arts within Ireland and worldwide, such as through film festivals or providing Irish films to exhibitors overseas (Irish Film Board, 2021). By investing in *Beckett on Film*, the Irish Film Board and Culture Ireland drew creative personnel and other investors into Ireland but also supported the export of Irish cultural products and promoted the visibility of Ireland as a brand. Many of the directors making *Beckett on Film* already worked in Ireland, and overseas collaborators such as the Canadian Atom Egoyan had links with Ireland. Egoyan had shot his film *Felicia's Journey* (1999) in Cork shortly before he directed *Krapp's Last Tape* for the project. Investment from Channel 4 for *Beckett on Film* followed the channel's policy to both support production of independent films and promote cultural knowledge among its audience (Smith, 2014).[7] The channel had an Independent Film and Video Department to sponsor experimental productions, and funded films intended for theatrical distribution but also television showing on its own Film4 channel (launched in 1998). Channel 4 did not much engage with the strong British tradition of commissioning original television drama so much as with the British film industry, financing and screening films by directors such as Stephen Frears or Derek Jarman.

Beckett on Film was supported by institutions with a cultural mission and money to support experimental projects, though for different reasons.

As an independent production company, Blue Angel owns the films it makes and can sell rights to them. The sale of distribution rights is the major income source for film making and the profitability of a film depends on correctly estimating their commercial value. Another key funding source is the sale of secondary or subsidiary rights, especially television broadcast, DVD sales or streaming of a film, and merchandising rights for film-related products. Both RTÉ and Channel 4 had track records of making television adaptations of Beckett's plays and co-financed the project in exchange for television rights to screen it. Although Beckett on screen in the Anglophone world is most associated with the BBC (Bignell, 2009: 99–111), Channel 4 made *Three Plays by Samuel Beckett* (1990) with director Walter Asmus, for example. Channel 4's original remit, laid down by the 1980 Broadcasting Act, required it to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by Britain's main commercial broadcaster, ITV, to make educational programmes, and to encourage innovation in the form and content of programmes. *Beckett on Film* could be seen as realising each of these three imperatives (Bignell, 2019). Channel 4 became involved when the production team approached it for a substantial financial contribution. Michael Jackson, the channel's Chief Executive from 1997 to 2001, recalled: 'As I remember it they needed to make up the budget and had a specific number in mind.' (Jackson, 2021) Despite the project's many links to cinema *auteurs*, its title's incorporation of the word *Film* and its presence on the international film festival circuit, financially the project was structured like a television co-production. Again, *Beckett on Film* straddled distinctions between mediums, taking advantage of convergences between them.

Screening and distribution

When screened on RTÉ and Channel 4 in 2001 the plays achieved low audience ratings but they fitted the remit of the channels to do cultural work for the public good (Bignell, 2019). RTÉ, the main broadcaster in Ireland, is funded both through general taxation and by advertising revenue, and is tasked with offering a broadly based entertainment, education and information service that gives space to domestically produced Irish content and represents Irish life. Since 1999 it had been required by law to commission 20 per cent of its programmes from independent producers and undertook co-productions with Channel 4 to make the most of its shrinking budget (Sheehan, 2004: 47). Channel 4, established in 1982, was required to be distinctively different from the main BBC1 and ITV channels and to represent and serve minorities. It made no programmes of its own and often commissioned or acquired them from small, independent producers with specialist interests. Its dependence on advertising revenue meant Channel 4 also showed popular audience-pleasing programmes like reality shows and US sitcoms, yet its brand was appropriate for Beckett's prestigious but demanding work. By the time of the making of *Beckett on Film* in 2000, Channel 4 had bulging coffers, thanks to profits that had risen from £330 million in 1993 to £650 million (Born, 2003: 778). According to Jackson (2021), *Beckett on Film* was 'not commissioned with profit in mind' but represented a 'classic example of cross subsidy' in which income from commercially successful output was used to fund programmes with perceived public value. This was recognised when the project was awarded the South Bank Show prize for Best Television Drama in 2002, selected by a panel of British industry experts. The prize categorised the plays as a single television work, rather than as a set of cinema films or as multiple television dramas. Accepting the prize, Cathal Goan, RTÉ's Director of Television, described Beckett as 'a giant of Irish literature'. In his view, the project was 'a huge privilege for RTÉ, and as such it belongs to the highest traditions of public service broadcasting.'

(IFTN, 2002) *Beckett on Film* conflated literature, theatre, film and television to the project's benefit.

Beckett on Film was already a convergent product deriving from both cinema and television cultures. For Channel 4 it was also aligned with a broader move into digital services such as the launch of a digital channel for youth audiences, E4, in 2001. Jackson summarised the position as being

> like the BBC but maybe more so; always a mix of objectives – sometimes, as with C4 news, subsidised, sometimes profit making as with *Big Brother*. Often C4 [is] at its best when it combines 'remit' with noisy and noticed programmes like *Queer as Folk*. Over the years it's been harder for C4 to devote airtime to the kind of programming that defined C4 in its earlier days – like Beckett, things like a Fred Wiseman season or foreign language films. Even [the] Film Four channel now has commercials. To a certain extent the rise of feature length docs and on-line has stood in for this. (Jackson, 2021)

The British television broadcasts of *Beckett on Film* got rather lost in Channel 4's schedules (Bignell, 2019). In Ireland, as Helena Sheehan reports, 'many [viewers] taped them, because they were worthy and should be archived, but never got around to watching them.' (Sheehan, 2004: 47) The emergent positioning of the project as a multiplatform, convergent work was supported by Channel 4's commissioning of theatre critic Aleks Sierz (2001) to write an accompanying booklet, priced £4.95, as a further supplement to the adaptations. The richly illustrated booklet gives an account of Beckett's life and work, as well as his importance to theatre, and has short features on the *Beckett on Film* adaptations including quotations from

their actors and directors. Increasing numbers of paratexts and supplementary texts became attached to the project as its mediums and audiences changed.

There was an economic downturn around the millenium that reduced advertising income, and the internet and multichannel television eroded television audiences (Channel 4, 2020: 24–8). Channel 4 moved *Beckett on Film* to a daytime slot and targeted the films at schools and colleges under its 4Learning brand, set up in 2000 as a commercial subsidiary. This opportunity to offer Beckett's work to schools came about because the two major providers of curriculum support on television, the BBC and ITV, had withdrawn from educational broadcasting on their main channels, moving such content to specialist channels or online. As Jackson saw it: 'C4 needs to use its limited airtime to fight for attention in a crowded multi-channel – and streamer and on-line – market. Arguably it still provides value – see *Channel 4 News* and Paralympics and *It's a Sin*, for example. C4 has had to change with the cultural and creative context it lives in.' (Jackson, 2021). Digital multichannel television allowed big international players like Sky and Disney to launch new services and peel viewers away from the older generalist channels, which regrouped and changed their strategies. Channel 4 stepped into a role left vacant by its competitors, offering public value and commercial educational material in a distinctive way. *Beckett on Film* was part of a strategy to develop programming niches that others had abandoned, and to address specific audiences that were under-served. Teenagers at school were now the audience for *Beckett on Film*, overlapping with Channel 4's address to teenagers in its entertainment programmes and channels. Georgina Born describes 4Learning in this context as 'cross-platform educational output, seen as ripe for both commercial and public service expansion as well as a means of responding to government promotion of broadband educational delivery' (Born, 2003: 784). *Beckett on Film* adapted again, fitting into a complex audio-visual ecosystem that was continually in flux.

DVD, online video and resilience

As a DVD, *Beckett on Film* invites comparison with other box set products and their attractions for a purchaser. It was released in November 2001, at a price of £100, via the films' Irish distributor, Clarence Pictures', website (IFTN, 2001) and also through Channel 4's website.[8] By that time about one-third of the British audience was viewing television on digital rather than analogue devices (Born, 2003: 773), and the UK Government's Communications White Paper of 2000 had placed the onus on television broadcasters to bring the country into the internet age by driving take-up of digital services. The UK's regulatory bodies for cinema, television, telephony and the internet were subsumed into a single authority, Ofcom. Divisions between media and between public and commercial services were being blurred, and Channel 4 pioneered multi-platform and interactive television in which programme brands were used to invite audiences to migrate from television to DVD, to the internet and back. The channel also needed to monetise programme-related digital resources after it had dropped into deficit due to over-spending on imported popular US series. While the *Beckett on Film* DVD would not have swelled Channel 4's coffers significantly, Beckett's plays were carried along in a larger shift of educational and high-cultural resources from analogue, time-bound mediums towards digital products to be owned and consumed at the user's convenience. The audio-visual landscape was changing, and *Beckett on Film* changed with it.

On DVD the plays have higher image and sound quality than are normally available to viewers of broadcast television, with a picture format (based on the MPEG-2 standard) offering about twice the detail of analogue television, and with Dolby Digital sound (Tryon, 2013: 100). Additional features emphasise the project's curation as well as the attractions of the films themselves, pandering to the cinephile, Beckett fan or educational user. The DVD

is, in a sense, a documentary that illustrates how Colgan and Moloney's project of adaptation was done, since as well as the plays themselves the box set includes the 'making-of' film *Check the Gate*, featuring extracts from interviews with the plays' directors and some behind-the-scenes footage. The DVD package is aligned with the cinephilia associated with box set culture, and which Barbara Klinger calls 'a mainstreaming of the educational imperative' in that the purchaser is invited to add *Beckett on Film* to a 'personal library, no longer solely the possession of the eccentric, as both an archive of the past and a signifier of erudite taste' (Klinger, 2008: 26)

The packaging of the box set incorporates a forty-page booklet, described on its front cover as a 'souvenir book', that briefly introduces the project and has an illustrated layout of one or two pages for each play incorporating images, production credits and brief quotations from the director or actors. The *Check the Gate* documentary gets its own feature page too, marking the significance of the DVD's 'making of' and behind-the-scenes information in adding value to the plays themselves. These supplementary materials enfold the plays in a rich interpretive context and raise further questions as to what *Beckett on Film* is. Its curation by Colgan and Moloney presented it as the legacy of the Gate's Beckett festival. Yet the films on the DVD set are largely not versions of the theatre productions and make much of the creative interpretations made by international cinema and television directors. As a physical object designed to be owned and repeatedly viewed, the box set invites its viewer to contextualise the plays in relation to the interviews, production history and reference material about Beckett's life and artistic significance provided in its accompanying materials and packaging. The DVD archives the project for posterity and memorialises it, in what John T. Caldwell calls a process of 'aesthetic canonizing' that comprises four activities, each of which have been discussed in this chapter: 'control' of the material, 'virtuosity' in its

creation, and the promotion of the project's 'authenticity and cultural influence' (Caldwell, 2008: 163–4).

YouTube versions of the *Beckett on Film* plays do not seem to have been uploaded by their copyright owner and their legitimacy is uncertain. They are unlike the cross-media spin-offs and promotional extras commonly produced for YouTube, where streamed video offers limited free content that persistently invites users to intensify and extend their involvement with a creator or a brand by moving across to paid content on parallel platforms or to a DVD product. The free upload of selected or abbreviated works, such as extracts from archive television series or samples of older cinema films, can encourage consumers to buy the original and it may be that the online *Beckett on Film* plays tempt purchasers towards the DVD. The public benefits of *Beckett on Film* last longer when the plays are freely accessible on the internet, while at the same time showcasing the project's achievement. Such a cultural service may be worth the loss of some potential revenue. *Beckett on Film* on YouTube does not offer the opportunity to possess a commodity like a DVD disc, but it does enable users to partially evade the relatively prescriptive discourses of authorisation in the DVD's paratextual materials. Mike Frangos (2012) has analysed unauthorised internet video adaptations of Beckett's plays, and like them the unauthorised YouTube *Beckett on Film* videos introduce uncertainty about control, authorship, authorisation and authority.

YouTube becomes a channel through which the *Beckett on Film* adaptations pass relatively unchanged, but with greater freedom for users to frame them in their own ways. The user 'Dublin Tales', apparently a group comprising Dublin tour guides, uploaded *Waiting for Godot* from the DVD in 2018, describing the drama as 'one of the most significant plays of the twentieth century', and as 'a masterpiece that draws endless interpretations' (*Waiting for Godot*, 2018). A variety of viewers commented on the play, many of them confirming its emotional impact on them. Other responses noted that the video

was useful for university students, that the performance would benefit from some music in the silent passages, or that it was a boring waste of time. But in each case what YouTube made possible was a public demonstration of a relationship between user and text. The opportunity to comment publicly on *Godot* is an occasion for self-identification, and for taking part in repositioning the adaptation within a new and modifiable context comprising the always-visible users' comments. Online video is another – democratised but disordered – kind of curation and archiving to which *Beckett on Film* adapts.

The tensions at stake in the transitions of *Beckett on Film* between different mediums are displayed not only in the texts but also in the peripheral, paratextual materials around the project. The transposition of Beckett's plays from theatre to film and television, DVD to streamed video, is a movement across audio-visual media that have developed specific historical conventions that are not essential but contingent. 'Film' can mean not only the theatrical exhibition of individual audio-visual works, such as when some of the *Beckett on Film* productions were scheduled at the Venice Film Festival, but also the group of television films funded by and intended for screening on Channel 4 as part of a series of free-to-air broadcasts. A 'film' can equally be one of the items on a menu of works laser-etched on a DVD and packaged in a box for home viewing. It can be a kind of audio-visual content requested and delivered wirelessly over the internet to a smart TV screen. Each of these 'films' might in some sense contain the same material (a production of *Waiting for Godot* comprising the same visual, aural and linguistic materials, for instance) but each is in dialogue with the conventions of the medium in which it is presented.

One of the ways that mediums have adapted to changing historical circumstances has been by changing their position relative to their comparators. By adapting to the changed opportunities and constraints of the present, both the medium and the text it adapts can suit themselves to the demands of the moment. It follows, as cinema theorist André Bazin (2000)

has argued, that neither texts nor media are self-sufficient essences. Adapting the concepts of performativity developed in linguistic theory (Austin, 1971) and for Performance Studies (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995), we can consider the identity of a medium to be performative, as mediums jostle amongst each other to find their place, converging and diverging in new ways. Performance is an activity of articulating identity, in which it is continually becoming and being remade, and the intermedial and transmedial adaptations of *Beckett on Film* are an excellent site for studying the resultant complex processes of interaction, circulation and appropriation.

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Notes

[1] Beckett's first play *Eleutheria* (written in 1947) was not adapted because performing rights were not available.

[2] The film director John Boorman, who lived in Ireland, used the studios for *Excalibur* (1981) and *The Tailor of Panama* (2001).

[3] Beckett's first audio-visual work, *Film* (1964), already thematised the relationship between authorship and medium specificity; see (Bignell 1999).

[4] Examples include siblings Niamh, Sorcha and Sinéad Cusack in Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (1990) and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Frances McDormand (1998).

[5] RTÉ News, 5 February 2000. Available at https://www.rte.ie/archives/2020/0116/1107863-beckett-on-film/ (accessed 15 October 2021).

[6] Blue Angel(s) has not been a prolific producer, but also made the Irish-based *Miss Conception* (2007), a comedy romance starring Heather Graham.

[7] For example, Channel 4's first chief executive Jeremy Isaacs appointed film critic Leslie Halliwell to acquire television rights to classic films, and Derek Hill to secure art films and foreign films for television transmission.

[8] The DVD sales web pages, http://www.clarencepix.ie and http://www.beckettonfilm.com, no longer exist.