

London Beckett Seminar
Programme, Abstracts and Biographies
2022-23

Convenors:

Prof Derval Tubridy, Goldsmiths, University of London
Stefano Rosignoli, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Contact:

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Friday, 23rd September 2022, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
Free event, but registration required
(link to be circulated prior to the online session)

Dr Nick Wolterman (Independent)
“Beckett’s Imagined Interpreters and the Failures of Modernism”

Samuel Beckett’s work is littered with ironic self-reflexive comments on presumed audience expectations that artistic expression must always convey clear logical propositions. An ample store of letters and anecdotes suggests Beckett’s own preoccupation with, and disapproval of, the same presumed audience expectations. Many of these comments, letters and anecdotes are shot through with a sense of Beckett’s resignation. Beckett tends to anticipate an un-ideal reception in which audiences will always claim to find coherent meanings and messages, as if they were always aiming to contextualise, and therefore neutralise, the work’s rhetorical and stylistic experimentation.

This observation is central to my recent monograph, *Beckett’s Imagined Interpreters and the Failures of Modernism*, which asks how Beckett’s ideas about his audiences influence his writing and in turn sheds new light on the conflicted social ambitions that many scholars see at the heart of modernism. During my seminar session, I will talk through the findings of my book and suggest potential avenues for further research.

NICK WOLTERMAN is an independent scholar based in York, England. He received his PhD in English and Related Literature from the University of York in 2017. During his PhD, he served as Reviews Editor and then Managing Editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Modernism/modernity*. He is currently Senior Commissioning Editor at Bloomsbury Publishing for Economics, African Studies and International Development.

Friday, 21st October 2022, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
Free event, but registration required
(link to be circulated prior to the online session)

Dr Hannah Simpson (The University of Edinburgh)
“Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance”

Samuel Beckett’s plays have attracted a striking range of disability performances—that is, performances that cast disabled actors, regardless of whether their roles are explicitly described as “disabled” in the text. What is it about Beckett’s stage plays that attracts disability performance? What does a performance that translates a Beckett script in explicitly disabled terms do to our understanding of that text, or to our understanding of Beckett’s work more broadly? Or, more specifically: what do such performances reveal about these playtexts’ persistent concern with the conditions of embodied existence, and with the impaired body and mind?

Drawing on my new monograph, *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*, this talk addresses these questions with reference to historic and contemporary disability performances of Beckett’s work, and a new theorising of Beckett’s “disability aesthetic”. Hanna Marron as Winnie (*Happy Days*, dir. Michael Guvrin, 1985), Harold Pinter as Krapp (*Krapp’s Last Tape*, dir. Ian Rickson, 2006), Nabil Shaban and Garry Robson, and Dan Moran and Chris Jones as Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*, dir. Robert Rae, 2007, and Joe Grifasi, 2012), Jess Thom as Mouth (*Not I*, dir. Matthew Pountney, 2017), and Tommy Jessop and Otto Baxter as Vladimir and Estragon (*Waiting for Godot*, dir. Sam Curtis Lindsay and Daniel Vais, 2018): these productions emphasise or rework previously undetected indicators of disability in Beckett’s work. More broadly, they reveal how Beckett’s theatre compulsively interrogates alternative embodiments, unexpected forms of agency, and the extraordinary social interdependency of the human body.

HANNAH SIMPSON is Lecturer in Drama and Performance in the Department of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. She previously served as the first Rosemary Pountney Junior Research Fellow in British and European Theatre at St Anne’s College, University of Oxford. She is the author of *Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Witness: Pain in Post-War Francophone Drama* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). She is also Theatre Review Editor for *The Beckett Circle* and welcomes contact from anyone interested in reviewing for us.

Friday, 18th November 2022, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
Free event, but registration required
(link to be circulated prior to the online session)

Dr Michael Krimper (Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University)
“The Insurgent Art of Failure: Beckett, Sade and the Lost Volume of *Transition*”

At the cusp of 1951, Samuel Beckett started to read, compile and translate a constellation of French language texts on the Marquis de Sade, as well as excerpts from Sade himself, for a prospective issue of the journal *Transition* which never appeared in print. However, his close contact and editor at the journal, Georges Duthuit, saved those documents for the archives, where I found them several years ago and subsequently began the arduous process of getting them published for the first time. What caught Beckett’s attention was, as he put it, the “Sade boom”, which had inspired the Surrealists and crystallised in France after the Second World War. Writers like Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Maurice Heine and Pierre Klossowski, among others, sought to renew Sade’s body of work in order to explore a literature of revolt premised on trenchant critiques of Enlightenment reason, progress and sovereignty. In this talk, I will consider the importance of the Sade project for Beckett and, more generally, his participation in the trans-linguistic and -national programme of *Transition* at a key moment of his writing, towards the end of the “siege in the room” (1946-50). Beckett’s contributions to the journal, as well as his dialogues with Duthuit on contemporary art, literature and philosophy, converged with his own sustained experiments in writing from the standpoint of impossibility, which is to say from the weakness, incapacity and resistance of failure. In situating Beckett’s creative output within this context, we can gain a fuller understanding of the insurgent potential traversing his celebrated distillation and performance of the aesthetics and poetics of failure in the “Three Dialogues” with Duthuit, where Beckett argues that the predicament of the artist is to fail as no other dare fail: a view which continued to shape his art of diminishment for decades to come.

MICHAEL KRIMPER teaches in the Department of French and in the Gallatin School at New York University. He is currently finishing a book on anti-work aesthetics and politics, titled *Out of Work: The Refusal of Literature from Melville to Blanchot*, and is co-editing a volume of essays, titled *Beckett Ongoing: Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). This past spring, a special issue he put together on Beckett’s lost translations of and around Sade was published by the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (31.1, 2022). His other research has appeared in *New Literary History*, *Diacritics*, *SubStance*, *Parallax* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among other venues.

Friday, 16th December 2022, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
Free event, but registration required
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Prof Pascale Sardin (Université Bordeaux Montaigne)
“Feelgood *Godot*? A Discussion of Emmanuel Courcol’s *Un triomphe (The Big Hit)*”

In their introduction to *Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture* (*ibidem*-Verlag, 2019), Paul Stewart and David Pattie reflect upon the hierarchical opposition between high and low cultures, noting that there is an inevitable form of “dumbing down” when Samuel Beckett is introduced into mainstream culture. Emmanuel Courcol’s feelgood movie *Un triomphe (The Big Hit)*, (2021) offers a new take on this issue. Based on the true story of Swedish director Jan Jönson, who started touring the world with a one-man show retracing his own experience of directing *Godot* with prison inmates after four of them escaped, the film showcases the performing of *En attendant Godot* by French convicts in today’s France. The film—which stars popular actor Kad Merad, alongside highbrow actors from the prestigious Comédie-Française troupe—flaunts the opposition between high and low in many ways. At the same time, it stages the grim reality of the French carceral system, which is depicted in an almost documentary way. This presentation will reflect upon this mix of genres in the film and will show how its *feelgoodness* is only a surface one. It will question the showcasing of Beckett’s first performed play in the context of the post-2015 Paris attacks that fostered a strong anti-Muslim feeling and will argue that the film, which was co-produced by Robert Guédiguian, a politically engaged producer who believes in a utopic form of art, recuperates chosen pieces from *Godot* to read them in a humanistic light. While this reading seems hardly in tune with the anti-humanism of the original text, it makes sense in its new context of presentation. Concurrently, the film interrogates the power of humour and comedy to address social issues and possibly redress social divides.

PASCALE SARDIN is Professor in English Studies at Bordeaux Montaigne University, where she teaches translation studies and literature. Her research focuses on issues of translation, feminism and theatre. She is the author of *Samuel Beckett auto-traducteur où l’art de l’empêchement* (Artois Presses Université, 2002), *Samuel Beckett et la passion maternelle ou l’hystérie à l’œuvre* (Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009) and *Rien à faire: Beckett, l’ouverture de Godot* (Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2014). She has published articles in *Palimpsestes*, *French Studies*, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui*, *Journal of Beckett Studies* and *Modernism/modernity*. With José Francisco Fernández, she recently co-edited *Translating Beckett around the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). She is currently writing a literary biography of Barbara Bray, a radio producer and journalist who collaborated with Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Joseph Losey, and translated Marguerite Duras into English.

Friday, 20th January 2023, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
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Dr Marco Bernini (Durham University)
“Beckett and the Apparent Self: Awakenings, Predictions, Protentions”

The contemporary scientific debate about the self can be qualified as an arena opened by a Cartesian orphanage. For long, as Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Spear note, Descartes’ “thesis that self is a single, simple, continuing, and unproblematically accessible mental substance resonated with common sense, and quickly came to dominate European thought” (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4.5-6 (1997), 399). The growing amount of books by foremost philosophers of mind (Thomas Metzinger) and neuroscientists (Bruce Hood, Michael S. Gazzaniga) on the “illusion of self” (Miri Albahari) is the most tangible sign of how the current dominating theory is rather that we are not who we feel or think we are. If hardly anybody questions that our common phenomenological *sense* of being or having a self is real, the illusion would reside precisely in a misalignment between this phenomenological feeling and a different underlying ontology. This debate has led to a vital new “tradition of disagreements” (Shaun Gallagher), with a variety of competing or complementing explanatory models attempting to account for what is illusory about the self, for what is not and for how this illusion is generated. These models will be progressively reviewed throughout this talk, as the theoretical ground against which to understand and analyse Beckett’s own variety of modeling solutions in exploring what he also called, in a letter to Georges Duthuit of 27 July 1948, “the illusion of the human and the fully realised” (*LSBII*, 86). To introduce contemporary models of how the illusion of our human self is fully realised, I will start by comparing this experience with the scientific study of “apparent motion” inaugurated by the father of the Gestalt School of psychology, Max Wertheimer, whose work Beckett came into contact with in his formative years, as illustrated by Laura Salisbury. Beckett’s interest, after Proust, in altered awakenings and failed reconnections over the phenomenal gaps of night and sleep will also guide us, together with contemporary models of the “predictive mind” (Jakob Hohwy), while we approach different modeling solutions Beckett adopted across different media to investigate what I will define as the “apparent self”. This talk will be based on the first chapter of my monograph *Beckett and the Cognitive Method*, which sets forth a theoretical argument for Beckett’s relevance to the scientific study of the mind.

MARCO BERNINI is Associate Professor in Cognitive Literary Studies at Durham University. His research focuses on narrative theory, modernist fiction and cognitive science. He works on the relationship between mind and narrative, and chiefly on how literary narratives explore and model cognitive processes. He has also worked on the extended mind theory and authorial agency, on empirical studies on readers, and on narrative and cognitive theories of complexity and emergence. He has recently led an interdisciplinary project on dreaming and narrative (<https://thresholdworlds.org.uk>), and published the monograph *Beckett and the Cognitive Method: Mind, Models, and Exploratory Narratives* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Friday, 24th February 2023, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
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Clara Simpson (Théâtre de la Manufacture)
“Performing *Not I*”

Performing *Not I* has been very much part of my journey as an actor, and it is a school of acting like no other. I first performed the piece as part of a trilogy in 2007 at the Théâtre National Populaire in France. I was an associate artist there at the time and the idea was to show the humane underbelly of Beckett’s work, counteracting the austere post-modern reputation he had in France at the time. His short works for women were relatively unknown and he was still largely considered a French writer with British roots! The aim was to connect him to the Irish literary tree, to the warmth, humour and landscape of his youth. The first time I read the piece, tears rolled down my face. I had no idea what had happened to the character, but her pain and struggle to overcome and make sense of it were heartbreaking. As an actor, my first instincts were to convey this heartache and trauma to an audience. First rule of the Beckett school of acting: it is not up to you to emote—the character’s goal is to overcome, not to indulge. It is the energy deployed by that struggle that the audience perceives and empathises with.

Technically the major challenge is the punctuation. The first job at hand was to identify and reassemble the narrative threads of a seemingly nonsensical ranting, to establish a recognisable human being in the throes of mental deconstruction and to bring the audience on that journey. Rule number 2: I had to find a real voice and avoid at all costs a disembodied tone, often associated with Beckett’s work. The central spine for the actor is the rhythm. The piece is written like a musical score. The pace echoes a natural thought-scape that, as the piece progresses, accelerates and fragments. To achieve the crescendo it needs to go fast, but it is important to remain anchored. The danger with *Not I* is to let the speed cancel out the colour and variation. Rule number 3: a slow and thorough learning process, where every thought, emotion and contrast is isolated, then methodically pieced back together again before slowly building up speed. Then all you have to do is press play! It will be a pleasure to present and explore my acting process as a guest speaker of the London Beckett Seminar, this year.

CLARA SIMPSON trained at Dublin Theatre School and at La Classe Libre, Cours Florent, Paris. She was an associate artist of the Théâtre National Populaire and has performed on many of the main stages in Paris. Her solo-piece *Kitchen Blues*, written for her by playwright poet Jean-Pierre Siméon, was performed in Avignon OFF 2018 at Le Train Bleu and will be touring in 2023. In Ireland, she has worked notably at the Abbey, Peacock and Project theatres. She was awarded an Irish Times Theatre Award for her role in *Lolita* and in 2010 she performed Winnie in *Happy Days*, both directed by Annie Ryan. Recent work includes extensive international touring with the Dublin based company Dead Centre. Her *Pas moi/Not I* premiered in Paris and has featured at the Happy Days International Beckett Festival in Enniskillen in 2018, 2019 and 2022.

Friday, 24th March 2023, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
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Prof Jonathan Bignell (University of Reading)
“Adaptation and Convergence: *Beckett on Film*”

The *Beckett on Film* project (2000) adapted all nineteen of Beckett’s theatre works, creating screen versions that were shown at film festivals, as television broadcasts, sold as a DVD box set and distributed via online video streaming. This paper argues that these evolutions of the project are more significant than simply repackaging the content produced in one medium for consumption in another. Rather, they work with and reflect on the borders between mediums, often self-consciously and reflexively, and address the ways that creative works fit into new medial environments. *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 these adaptation processes. The paper traces the British and Irish stories of how the Blue Angel production company, the Irish broadcaster RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann) and the British Channel 4 television channel framed *Beckett on Film* in its various manifestations. The paper addresses the project’s genesis, production, scheduling for cinema and its television screenings addressed to specialist, general and then educational audiences. It also considers how the project’s subsequent adaptation into the “new” media of DVD and online YouTube video framed the series as a cultural asset and a prestige collectable, aligning it with discourses of taste and connoisseurship. The paper makes the case for *Beckett on Film*’s resilience and its fit with an emergent culture of media convergence in which medial boundaries were being renegotiated.

JONATHAN BIGNELL is Professor of Television and Film at the University of Reading. He works primarily on television drama and the methodologies of television and film analysis. His work on Beckett includes the monograph *Beckett on Screen*, the collection *Beckett’s Afterlives* (with Anna McMullan and Pim Verhulst) and several articles in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies*. His recent chapters on Beckett’s screen drama include contributions to *Beckett and Media*, *Samuel Beckett and Technology*, *Beckett’s Voices/Voicing Beckett* and *Pop Beckett*. He is a Trustee of the Beckett International Foundation and member of the Samuel Beckett Research Centre.

Friday, 21st April 2023, 18.00-19.00
Zoom Meeting
Free event, but registration required
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Prof Ulrika Maude (University of Bristol)
“Beckett’s Obscene Body of Poetry and Other Precipitates”

Published in 1935, Beckett’s first collection of poems, *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*, is characterised by an insistence on forms of bodily abjection, on imagery that is seldom associated with poetry. Figures such as “red sputum”, a “clot of anger”, “sweating” or “perspiring”, and phrases such as “breaking without fear or favour wind” permeate the collection, while in “Enueg II”, tulips seem to shine “like an anthrax”. In “Sanies I”, the title itself signifies the discharge of blood and pus from a wound, and the poem’s speaker has “hair ebbing gums ebbing”, while in “Sanies II” “a shiver convulses Madame de la Motte”. In “Malacoda”, written as a response to the death of Beckett’s father, the undertaker “felts [the] perineum” of the corpse and “mutes his signal”. The poetry, while having its antecedents in writers ranging from Ovid to Joyce, is obscene in the sense of being “offensive to the senses, or to taste or refinement” (*OED*), rendering it a type of anti-poetry that resists traditional conceptions of the aesthetic (as beautiful, as conceptual, as combining the sensory with the spiritual). The language and imagery of Beckett’s first collection of poems, with its refusal of metaphor and its lexical and syntactical resistances to interpretation—“scutal”, “malebranca”, “mutes his signal”, “ungulata”, “targe”, “divine dogday glass”, “stay Scarmilion stay stay” (all from “Malacoda”)—also resists the metaphysical consolations of poetry through its emphasis on metonymy and semantic opacity, and by insistently drawing attention to what is offensive to the senses and to sense. This paper will analyse the ethical demand of Beckett’s obscene body of poetry as a kind of anti-poetry.

ULRIKA MAUDE is Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Bristol, where she also directs the Centre for Health, Humanities and Science. She is the author of *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *Samuel Beckett and Medicine* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), and co-editor of a number of volumes, including *Beckett and Phenomenology* (Continuum, 2009), *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Bloomsbury Companion to Modernist Literature* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). She is currently editing *Key Concepts in Medical Humanities* (Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming). She is Review Editor of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* and Visiting Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Finland (2020-23).

The Seminar

The LONDON BECKETT SEMINAR brings together national and international scholars, researchers, postgraduate students and the general public to discuss issues arising from the prose, theatre and poetry of Samuel Beckett that pertain to aspects of literary, philosophical and historical analysis, with particular emphasis on translation studies, performance and practice, digital humanities and visual cultures. Inherently interdisciplinary in approach, the seminar has established a vibrant research network for postgraduate students, early-career researchers and established academics on a national and international level.

Established by Prof. Steven Connor (University of Cambridge), in 1998, and then convened by Prof. Laura Salisbury (University of Exeter)—both at Birkbeck, University of London, at the time—the London Beckett Seminar has been co-convened by Prof Derval Tubridy (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Stefano Rosignoli (Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin) since 2015. In recent years, the seminar has received the support of the Department of English and Creative Writing, at Goldsmiths, and of the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London. The seminar currently operates online as a carbon-neutral and cost-neutral seminar series with eight sessions each year. All queries can be sent to londonbeckettseminar@gmail.com.

The Organisers

Prof Derval Tubridy, Goldsmiths, University of London

DERVAL TUBRIDY is Professor of Literature and Visual Culture at Goldsmiths, University of London, and former Dean of the Graduate School and Associate Pro-Warden for Research and Enterprise. She is Co-Director of the London Beckett Seminar and Vice-Chair of the British Association of Irish Studies. She works on modern and contemporary literature, philosophy, performance and the visual arts with a particular focus on the intersections between language, materiality and process. Author of *Samuel Beckett and the Language of Subjectivity* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Thomas Kinsella: The Peppercanister Poems* (University College Dublin Press, 2001), she has published widely on Modernism and Irish Studies. Her work has been funded by the Fulbright Commission, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She can be contacted at d.tubridy@gold.ac.uk.

Stefano Rosignoli, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

STEFANO ROSIGNOLI received an MA in Modern Literature (2006) and an MPhil in Publishing Studies (2008) from the University of Bologna. From 2008 to 2015 he focused on trade publishing in Italy and the UK while taking the first steps towards his PhD in English, which he is completing at Trinity College Dublin. Stefano's academic education is grounded in textual studies at large, from philology to genetic criticism, balanced by formalism, structuralism and the semiotics of texts, and his research examines the philosophical exogenesis of Irish literature in English. He has recent or forthcoming publications on Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce; he teaches modern literature and theory at Trinity College and University College, in Dublin; and serves as Review Editor for *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship*. In 2018, he has been a James Joyce Visiting Fellow and J-1 Short-Term Scholar at the Humanities Institute, State University of New York at Buffalo, and a visiting research scholar at Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Cornell University. He can be contacted at rosignos@tcd.ie.