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Article

Accepted Version

Bignell, J. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4874-1601
(2020) Specially for television? Eh Joe, intermediality and Beckett's drama. Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui, 32 (1). pp. 41-54. ISSN 1875-7405 doi: 10.1163/18757405-03201004
Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/88769/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18757405-03201004

Publisher: Brill

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In: Trish McTighe, Emilie Morin and Mark Nixon (eds), 'Beckett and Intermediality', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 32:1 (2020), 41-54. doi:10.1163/18757405-03201004

Specially for Television?

Eh Joe*, Intermediality and Beckett's Drama*

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Abstract

This article analyses tensions between medium specificity and intermediality in Beckett's first original drama for television, *Eh Joe* (1966), which exploits features of the medium such as the spatiality of the studio, monochrome images and close-up. But its visual motifs also echo Beckett's cinema debut, *Film* (1964), and uses of sound and voice from his radio plays. The public promotion of *Eh Joe* centred on its relationships with Beckett's theatre plays, while *Eh Joe*'s first audiences adduced frames of reference from both theatre and television. *Eh Joe* works with the porosity of media boundaries and performatively renegotiates them.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les tensions entre spécificité et intermédialité du support dans le premier drame télévisuel original de Beckett, *Eh Joe* (1966), qui exploite des caractéristiques du support telles que la spatialité du studio, les images monochromes et les gros plans. Mais ces motifs visuels font également écho à ses débuts au cinéma, avec *Film* (1964), et aux utilisations du son et de la voix des pièces radiophoniques. La promotion publique de *Eh Joe* était axée sur ses relations avec les pièces de théâtre de Beckett, tandis que les premiers auditoires d'*Eh Joe* fournissaient des cadres de référence pour le théâtre et la télévision. *Eh Joe* travaille avec la porosité des frontières des médias et les renégocie en les intégrant à la performance.

Keywords

BBC, *Eh Joe*, intermediality, media, performance, television

This article addresses the medial identity of Beckett's first original drama for television, *Eh Joe* (1966) through a historically-informed study of its conception, production and reception. It extends ideas that I have introduced elsewhere (Bignell 2009), arguing that there are tensions in Beckett's screen work

between medium specificity and transmediality, and that these dynamic impulses can best be described through the concept of intermediality. Medium specificity is the idea that a specific medium has aesthetic properties that are determined by, and determining of, its identity as a medium, while transmediality is a critical category that traces transfers of the same trope, narrative or motif from one medium to another. Intermediality concerns the relations between media, where one medium interacts with another. This might refer to how a specific text works, such as how *Eh Joe* draws on the conventions of a stage play, a radio drama and a film, for example. Moreover, intermedial interactions can be argued to be a feature of a larger cultural and historical phenomenon of embodied interrelation between people, media technologies and media experiences (Pethő). From this perspective, a medium is not only a channel through which content passes, nor a means of representing a pre-existent reality, nor a set of technologies in use at a particular moment. Rather, in being all of these, media are processes of configuring the relationships between people and things, shaping being in the world through material and sensory as well as representational means. In this way, intermediality is adduced in arguments for the emergence of a post-human entanglement of living bodies with technologies, because each mediates the other. As Leslie Hill suggests, this offers a way of approaching more of Beckett's work than just his dramas for television: "Increasingly, Beckett's later plays, when they experiment with theatrical and other forms, are seeking to redefine performance in non-anthropomorphic terms (and this, at bottom, is probably the main reason for Beckett's sustained interest in the use of technology on stage and in the development of radio and television drama)" (25).

1 Audio-Visual Proprieties

In common with some other BBC productions in Britain in the mid-1960s, *Eh Joe*, written in 1965, matches the concerns of television practitioners and critics of the period who sought a dramatic aesthetic proper to the medium (Hill), as it came to maturity with established institutions, reliable technologies, recognized social functions and consistent mass audiences. Beckett's decision to work with the unfamiliar and problematic television medium was a way of exploring visual and aural forms through the spatial and abstract qualities of the television image, pursing transmedial themes also evident in his prose and theatre texts (Gontarski). *Eh Joe* begins with a wide shot of a set representing a room with door, windows and a bed. Joe checks that its door and window are sealed and curtained, then sits on the bed and a female voice begins to speak to him accusingly as the camera moves across the set towards him and frames him in an increasingly tight series of close-ups. The play seems preoccupied with looking in detail and listening to Voice; there are no flourishes of camera movement or editing. In its intense focus on embodied performance and voice, the play conforms closely to what the television director Don Taylor argued was the 'essence' of drama for the television medium:

> True television drama has a quite different aesthetic from film-making. It tolerates, in fact it relishes imaginative, argumentative and even poetic writing in a way the film camera does not. It is at its best in long, developing scenes, where the actors can work without interference from the director's camera, using their own timing rather than his.
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The play exploits the affordances of the production facilities available at the time, such as the enclosed, non-realist space of the studio, monochrome video images and a rhetorical emphasis on camera movement and close-up. But that apparent match with the proprieties of television is in fact constituted by impurity; by allusion, adaptation and reworking of themes, forms and motifs from media outside of television, and this paradox is a key characteristic of how Beckett's television dramas work. For example, close-up is a televisual technique suited to the size of its screen, where faces can easily become life-size and very arresting on the viewer's screen at home, but the development of close-up on faces derives from and crucially contributes to the medial identity of cinema, in work by the directors D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Carl Dreyer and Alfred Hitchcock for example (Paraskeva, 74). The camera's interest in Joe's "listening look," as Beckett described it to Alan Schneider (see McTighe, 41), combines the film and television media's focus on the gaze with radio listening's attentiveness. Medial identities are being combined and thematized. Invoking televisual and extra-televisual frameworks makes the plays an important route into theoretical work on the conceptualisation of television's intermedial relationships with film, radio and other, non-technological, media.

Eh Joe (like all of the BBC's productions of Beckett's television plays thereafter) was recorded in a television studio, and work on its aesthetics as television requires attention to questions of scenic design that are concretely determined by the possibilities of the studio space in which they were shot. The purpose of the studio, unlike an outside location, was to be an infinitely adaptable space that could represent any dramatic setting including an abstract or fantastical one. The room in which *Eh Joe* is set is not a room, but neither does it remain a studio: it resembles a theatrical set but is not in a theatre, and the scenic design of over-large walls and curtains refers to doors, windows and beds without mimetically representing them. As Rajewsky's work on intermediality shows, such gestures as those that *Eh Joe* makes towards theatre tempt the viewer into interpretive conventions and expectations that are impossible to hold on to. The effect of intermediality is to foreground the illusive coherence that each medial framework offers, and also to take it away. Television looks as if it is theatre, or perhaps a film, for example, and it is neither. From its opening shot, *Eh Joe* raises the questions of what mediation and medial identity are.

Eh Joe looks like television as far as the screen image's perceptual characteristics and rhythms of editing are concerned. In as much as *Eh Joe* works as a meditation on framing, the spatiality conveyed by the two-dimensional image, and the relationships between figure and background, it is in dialogue with art history and the exploration of visual form. Following Hill's argument briefly outlined above,

in *Eh Joe* and then in later television work the use of close-up, high-key lighting to create contrast, and the separation of the body from the set or a sense of surroundings, tend to reduce the anthropomorphic and realist aspects of the dramas. The body can be fragmented, separated from its visual background, and manipulated as an image in relation to non-figurative images elsewhere within the television frame.

The play was a black and white videotape recording, as was the German production of the play at the regional broadcaster Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) in the same year. Videotape has a relatively flat, non-contrastive, depthless visual quality compared to the luminescence and greater contrast of film, and the use of this electronic technology in drama was associated with television production in studio settings and the replay of live events (especially sport) (Barr). But the image was not technically inferior to film, since BBC2 had launched in 1964 with high definition 625 line transmission (in preparation for the start of colour broadcasting in 1967); for viewers with receivers that could screen them, the images of *Eh Joe* were much sharper than the 405 lines of visual information on the more established channels. In a sense, *Eh Joe* was at the forefront of televisuality because of its technical quality, but it was also consigned to the past by its slow pace, theatrical setting and monochrome images. The past to which the play gestures is a time when television relied on theatre for its dramatic content, and when techniques of presentation had yet to assert the independence of the medium (Bignell 2009, 12). *Eh Joe* looks like television that was made before television had found its own identity.

The temporality of *Eh Joe*'s lengthy interrogation suits the ontology of liveness, which can be considered a property of television. Its long takes, with no post-production editing except the assembly of the three parts of the drama, associates the play both with the continuous time of theatre performance and the television broadcast of drama performed in long sequences of action in story sequence (as opposed to shooting out of sequence and editing footage together, as in cinema). In *Eh Joe*, this sense of the continuous present is achieved by techniques like direct address to Joe and Voice's use of deictic language, siting the performance in a here and now. Although there is no studio audience, the play gives a powerful sense of presentation and witness because of the way that the camera's gaze is concentrated onto the relay of MacGowran's performance. Because of the camera's progressive movement from wide framing towards close up, increasingly all that there is for the viewer to see is the moment-to-moment work done by the actor. Despite the theatricality produced by this attention to performance, however, none of Beckett's television plays were shot in front of a studio audience, so the bodily and material qualities of performance and its reception in the moment of viewing are distanced by their technological mediation and reproduction. What the viewer sees is clearly happening elsewhere and elsewhen, combining television's lure of presentness with audio-visual remediation's necessary reliance on absence.

The play developed visual motifs explored in Beckett's cinema debut, *Film* (1964), particularly in two aspects; the question of the agency of the camera's point of view and the gradual shrinkage of the frame from wide to extreme close up shots. *Eh Joe* is structured around the same extreme splitting between looker and object of the gaze, and by the movement from an initially neutral wide-shot to an

increasingly interrogative, probing close up. *Film*'s working through of the problem of what the camera is —a double of the protagonist, an independent character, an observer, and all three at once—aligns the film with the avant-garde's critical investigations of spectatorship at the time, in European New Wave cinema and Structural/Materialist film (Paraskeva 132-141). Beckett's awareness of Marguerite Duras' work, for example, would have become more acute as a result of his relationship with Barbara Bray, a script editor in BBC radio drama who knew Duras and translated her work into English. Duras's films separate voice (which is often off-screen) from image, and Beckett's own film's very title provocatively suggests an investigation into medium specificity. *Film*'s pursuit motif also alludes to the chase films of early Hollywood, as does the casting of Buster Keaton, thus welding the project closely to a specific media history. In linking back to Beckett's *Film* in its formal and thematic similarities, *Eh Joe* has intermedial links with New Wave cinema and the rediscovered silent tradition with which Beckett had long been familiar and which was undergoing a renaissance of critical interest at the time. *Eh Joe* looks back, before television, and implies a series of media histories with which it engages.

But these relationships with media history are troubling rather than stabilizing, in as much as cinema at its inception was already intermedial anyhow. As Pethő remarks, the influential early theorist of cinema, Hugo Münsterberg, called its works 'photoplays' and thus characterized the medium as a combination of photography and theatre, while the early study by Vachel Lindsay goes so far as to break down the 'photoplay' into several further sub-categories, including 'sculpture in motion,' 'painting in motion' and 'architecture in motion' (50). His attempts to find a specific vocabulary for this impure medium led him to presenting cinema intermedially as writing in images, proposing a "hieroglyphics" of the moving image. While Beckett was probably not familiar with the detail of attempts to theorize mass media, he certainly knew Rudolf Arnheim's work on medium specificity and intermediality (Hartel, 220), and the writing in *Close Up* magazine (1927-33) that debated these issues. These ideas prefigure contemporary arguments for cinema, television and online video as media of convergence (Jenkins), in which medium specific technologies, and practices of production and reception, are being integrated or displaced. Audio-visual media works are made without celluloid or a camera, or indeed any material support other than digital information, to be experienced ubiquitously rather than in a specific location of reception, and are often instances of transmedial content franchises (Manovich). *Eh Joe* is out of time, pointing towards an intermedial future.

The uses of sound in *Eh Joe* have a clear relationship with Beckett's radio plays, notably the indeterminate ontological status of the voice. Beckett had been working for some time on transmedial explorations of how voice and other sounds or music might bind or loosen the sensory registers of performance. The BBC had been presenting Beckett's radio plays for many years by the time his television work was broadcast (see Addyman et al.), and the people producing and performing it cross over significantly with the television work. *All That Fall*, broadcast on the Third Programme in 1957, was the first of a long series of BBC dramas, among which *Embers* (1959) had featured MacGowran, for example, as did Beckett's version of Robert Pinget's *The Old Tune* (*La Manivelle*) in 1960, before

MacGowran's appearance on screen as Joe. Radio makes voice float apparently free of a body, and Beckett's work in other media had similarly explored how voice might adopt a body that it speaks through (in *How It Is*, for example) or be stored and subsequently reproduced to evoke a vanished moment (in *Krapp's Last Tape*). In the same year as *Eh Joe*, Beckett had worked with Marin Karmitz's Paris team to produce *Comédie*, the filmed adaptation of *Play* that used an electronically processed condensation of a pre-recorded soundtrack to which the on-screen actors mime the impossibly rapid dialogue of the play (Herren 2009). Voice, body, theatre performance and film's visual grammar were already blending and clashing intermedially.

2 Intermedial Framing

Eh Joe was screened for the first time on BBC's minority channel, BBC2, at 10.20 pm on Monday 4 July 1966. Television drama in Britain was by this time being organised at regular weekly times in the schedule, and under umbrella anthology titles like *The Wednesday Play* (1964-70) or *Thirty Minute Theatre* (1965-73) which functioned as brands associated with a type of dramatic offering; one-off commissions for television with contemporary themes and settings in the former case, and half-hour adaptations of modern theatre plays in the latter, for example. The advantage of this anthologization of drama was that it would orient viewers towards the kind of experience they might expect to have (Smart), but this was not the case with *Eh Joe*. There were no weekly slots for drama on BBC2 on Mondays, and no corresponding programme had been broadcast on the Mondays preceding or following Beckett's play. While this perhaps gave prominence to *Eh Joe* as a special event, it also removed the play from some of the generic and paratextual framing that would have enfolded other new drama of the time. This places greater weight on the discourse that BBC did produce in order to frame viewers' expectations and orient them to what they would see.

The discourses used in the promotion of the play before transmission centred on its relationships with Beckett's theatre plays and the reputations of its performers, MacGowran and Sîan Phillips, across multiple media. Beckett's new television drama was positioned intermedially, establishing television drama as an art that borrowed from the other arts (Cardwell) and from the different genres of television output. Upmarket broadsheet newspapers like *The Times* trailed *Eh Joe* with short features on the day of broadcast, referring to the cultural significance of its author, but they did not associate it with other contemporary television dramas. The contributors to the programme, including the director Alan Gibson but more importantly the actor, MacGowran, had particular track records that would have shaped how the play was interpreted. Programmes are also framed by the broadcast schedule in which they are embedded. Analysis of *Eh Joe* in relation to its medium and its intermedial relationships can be enriched by attention to paratextual materials, connecting with the growing body of work on the reception of Beckett (see Nixon and Feldman).

The most significant paratext would have been the listing in BBC's own magazine *Radio Times*, which was the nation's best-selling periodical and thus influential on how a significant tranche of the television audience would perceive the play. In the edition for the week beginning 30th June 1966, a short feature about programmes for the upcoming week noted that:

> Tonight's presentation may be described as a play, an essay in mime, or a dramatic poem, and it is in fact all three. … *Eh Joe?* [sic] was written specifically for television by Samuel Beckett, the Irishman long resident in France whose plays—*Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape*—have formed an important part of the post-war theatre revolution.
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To many viewers, Beckett's name would have been familiar as one among a group of contemporary playwrights whose challenging work had been important to theatre culture in the preceding years. The article helpfully reminds the reader of some of his most important plays, and links him not only to Ireland but also to France and its associations with the avant-garde. His significance meant that he and his work often featured in television programmes about contemporary culture, as well as his dramas themselves being screened in their own right. For example, the BBC made a midweek arts series in 1966, *The Theatre Today*, which featured extracts from *Godot* in its 17 March episode, and the two-minute videotaped piece was then re-broadcast in another BBC programme, an episode of the series on religion, *Seeing and Believing*, on 15 May 1966 (BBC WAC RCONT 18). The commercial ITV channel devoted two episodes of its lunchtime arts series *The Present* Stage to *Godot*, on the Sundays preceding *Eh Joe*'s broadcast on the rival BBC2 (Bignell 2019b). Some viewers would have been prepared for the new play by these associated broadcasts, and the more widespread recognition of Beckett's theatre work in the culture of the period. For some of the audience, Beckett was already positioned as an intermedial figure, associated most with theatre but also with a much broader international profile.

The *Radio Times* feature went on to note connections between the performers in *Eh Joe* and both television and theatre productions:

> The distinguished Irish actor Jack MacGowran has for long been a close personal friend of the author, and he has become (with Patrick Magee) one of the principal interpreters of his work. He is also one of drama's most skilled pantomimists, as evidenced by his recent television performance as the jockey turned Trappist monk in *Silent Song*. Sîan Phillips, the voice of Joe's past, has been seen recently in the West End theatre in *The Night of the Iguana* and *Man and Superman*.
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Two of the most salient features of *Eh Joe*, namely Joe's silence and Voice's vocal-only role, were framed by their realization through the work of notable performers on stage and screen. *Silent Song* was

a mime play, set in a monastery occupied by a silent order, in which the monks struggle to communicate by increasingly comic gestural means. MacGowran's expressive skill was one of the reasons for the BBC Audience Research Report on the play (BBC WAC T5/1928/1) to record a Reaction Index of 74 out of 100, showing great audience appreciation. The mention of Phillips' background in London's West End, in roles that showcased her abilities at characterization in complex, Naturalistic plays, must also have been intended to generate expectations of expressive skill and bravura performance. Acting offered intermedial connections that could frame viewers' expectations of Beckett's television work.

Records of responses to the play by *Eh Joe*'s first audiences show that the combination of frames of reference drawn from theatre and television caused interpretive problems that led them to denigrate the play. The Audience Research Report on *Eh Joe* (BBC WAC T5/1296/1) estimated its viewership as 3 per cent of the national audience, based on the percentage of the BBC's representative audience sample whose viewing they monitored and whose response to programmes they gathered through interviews. Although the BBC's output gave him and his plays an ongoing profile in popular culture, Beckett's work did not achieve much popularity (Bignell 2019b). The play's Reaction Index was 49, some dozen or so points below the score usually achieved by BBC dramas. A selection of representative comments was collected by the researchers from viewers, including praise for the play's evocation of Joe's isolation and the powerful effect of Voice's monologue in contrast with the silent images of Joe. The report noted one audience member's acknowledgement that television was ideally suited to explore how sound and image might be linked and separated in this experimental way. But many viewers thought the play was very depressing, and compelling rather than enjoyable. One third of the BBC's audience sample said it was dull and dreary, with no visual appeal. The report singled out one viewer's criticism of the studio set's sparse abstraction, which was different from the realistic environments usually created by BBC designers. In theatre, Beckett's name, at this time, was shorthand for obscurity, foreignness and perversity (Rebellato, 147), and some of *Eh Joe*'s audience were evidently as uncomfortable with alternatives to Naturalism and the well-made play as many theatre-goers. *Eh Joe* was perceived by its audiences transmedially and intermedially, as a continuation from theatre of themes of isolation and self-analysis, and formal experimentation, that were each evaluated ambivalently.

3 Identity Problems

The network of Beckett's supporters and collaborators affected the visibility of his work in different media and cultural contexts (Chignell, 656-659), and they had no compunction about suggesting that Beckett should adapt work in one medium for another, or try working in a new medium because of success in another. For example, Cecilia Reeves, Paris Representative of the BBC, saw the first production of *En attendant Godot* accompanied by Francophile BBC producer and translator Rayner

Heppenstall. Writing to her BBC colleague Donald McWhinnie, recently appointed deputy to the Head of Drama, she recommended that it would be better in another medium. She found the first Act very engaging, but in Act II, after a drink in the interval, her attention had wandered. A radio version would hold the audience's attention more effectively, she thought. (Reeves 1953). Because of her interest in Beckett's theatre work, it was she who first asked him to write a radio play (Reeves 1956), resulting in *All That Fall*. Its critical success led to a string of radio readings from Beckett's novels and arts profiles about him (Chignell, 659).

Stefano Rosignoli's discussion of Beckett's dealings with BBC radio demonstrates, however, that despite his keenness to have his work in the public domain, Beckett was both anxious about over-exposure and unwilling to allow transmedial adaptations of his literary works into radio readings. The exceptions were when relationships of trust that were built on personal contacts led Beckett to accept a proposal. For example, as Pim Verhulst has shown, in France the broadcast of *Tous ce qui tombes* on radio led to a flurry of requests for Beckett to adapt it for television, and eventually the making of Michel Mitrani's filmed version for Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (RTF) because Beckett admired the work of the original director of the proposed film, Alain Resnais. While Beckett's supporters (notably Esslin and McWhinnie) were among those looking for experimental work that tested the capabilities of a specific medium, especially on radio, their actual practice was to present Beckett transmedially and intermedially if he could be persuaded to allow it. As I have documented elsewhere (Bignell 2015), the presentation of Beckett's work in the different media of BBC radio and television often caused confusion for programme makers, and literary and theatrical agents, because it was not always easy for these intermediaries to know which medium the works had originated in and which medium any specific presentation would end up in. Moreover, there were original dramas as well as adaptations of theatre works for these media to consider, and readings of extracts from Beckett's literary publications, where transposition between media could give rise to objections from Beckett on artistic grounds and objections from copyright owners for legal and financial reasons. Beckett's work was transmedial and intermedial, which was both an advantage but also a potential source of confusion and conflict.

What is required for a sensible reading of *Eh Joe*, and, I would argue, all of Beckett's media work, is not only a methodology that can map out the aesthetic and material borrowing and crossings of media that operate in the works, tracking their intertextuality and the relationships between components taken from a range of sources. Such an attention to intertextuality is important because it productively questions the self-sufficiency of the object being studied. But addressing intermediality, in addition, can also restore the role of phenomenological, sensory, palpable and affective materiality in the work. It is telling that Dick Higgins first proposed the term 'intermedia,' in the year of *Eh Joe*'s first broadcast, by privileging the example of the Happening, a multi-sensory, performative art experience involving people, objects, colours, music and smells, for example. This article shares Sarah Kember's and Joanna Zylinska's emphasis on media as processes of mediation, rather than different

representational systems for rendering a reality. The adoption of this approach means examining how media work to construct or perform for their audiences, and this orientation towards the viewer or listener brings with it an awareness of how media establish relationships and engagements rather than standing apart from humankind. Media not only address and engage audiences, but are also entangled with each other in processes of separation and combination. In a sense, all media are hybrid combinations of temporal and performative processes, and spatial and representational ones, patterning human creativity, economy, expressivity and technology in changing, interacting ways.

The questions about what is proper to television that arise from an analysis of *Eh Joe*'s intermediality have a larger resonance. They show that television is a mixed form, while also luring its audience into an orientation that expects medium specificity. Intermediality has, paradoxically, been part of a debate about what television should be that was carried out by transforming pre-existing technologies, conventions, topics and modes of address. *Eh Joe* can be best understood, finally, as an instance of the porosity of medial boundaries at a time in the later 20th century when the identities of the media of performance were being renegotiated. Paradoxically, a distinguishing feature of *Eh Joe* and the television plays with which Beckett followed it, is their inclusion of a combination of forms deriving from the different media of television, radio, theatre, painting and film. The blurring of boundaries between media in *Eh Joe* is an instance of larger problems of identity around Beckett and his media work. In relation to their genetics, for example, James Knowlson reports (451) that *Film* was first intended for television. In his study of Beckett's television plays, Graley Herren points out that "half of the teleplays are named after other works of art—*Ghost Trio* after Beethoven's *Geister Trio*, *... but the clouds ...* after Yeats' s "The Tower," and *Nacht und Träume* after Schubert's lied of the same title—and all three of these teleplays incorporate direct quotations from their sources" (2007, 22). But to call these 'sources' suggests a hierarchy and a definitive sense of the borders between one text and another, which is why I argued elsewhere that they should be understood as part of an intertextual and intermedial network that flows through Beckett's work and his own authorial identity (Bignell 2009, 163). As Daniela Caselli has argued of the repetitions and reworkings of Dante in Beckett's prose, "Samuel Beckett the author is himself the product of this constant process of incorporation" (58). The 'source' and its reconfiguration, the medium and its allusions to other media, and the author as one node among a complex of textual sites, are all rendered volatile by an intermedial way of thinking about them. Medial identity is performed through relay, repetition and remediation (Bignell 2019a), and *Eh Joe* performs a lure of medium-specificity as part of television drama's ongoing struggle to assimilate with and differentiate itself from other media. An attention to intermediality shows that the rhetorical strategies of Beckett's television drama are constituted as much by processes of intersection and hybridity as by individuation and differentiation.

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