Neil Jordan, *Not I*
an adaptation for film of the play *Not I*, 1972 by Samuel Beckett

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Not I, 1972 by Samuel Beckett

Curated by Johanne Mullan,
National Programmer, IMMA

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IMMA exhibition team: Sarah Glennie, Director; Christina Kennedy, Senior Curator: Head of Collections; Johanne Mullan, National Programmer; Marguerite O'Molloy, Assistant Curator: Collections; Nuria Carballeira, Collections Registrar; Edmond Kiely & Antoinette Emoe, Technical Crew

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Áras Nua-Ealaíne na hÉireann
Royal Hospital, Military Road
Kilmainham, Dublin 8
Ireland
Tel: +353 1 612 9900
Fax: +353 1 612 9999
E-mail: info@imma.ie
Website: www.imma.ie

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HAPPY DAYS Enniskillen BECKETT festival

An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta
Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Reaching our second birthday as the world's largest annual celebration of Irish Nobel Prize writer Samuel Beckett, the Happy Days Enniskillen International Festival is delighted to co-present with the Irish Museum of Modern Art Neil Jordan's visual art installation of the Samuel Beckett short play *Not I* featuring American actress Julianne Moore.

Samuel Beckett attended the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen 1920-23, hence our choosing this island town amidst the still waters of Lough Erne as the venue for our late summer celebration. The Festival commissions and produces across many art forms – theatre, literature, classical music, visual art, comedy, cirque/mime film, radio & television – offering over 100 events in 30+ venues across five days at the end of each August.

The placing by curator Johanne Mullan of Neil Jordan's *Not I* installation in the Masonic Hall of our town is an inspiring one. Many in our local community will not only be experiencing the artistic work for the first time but also the venue.

The Neil Jordan installation of *Not I* also plays an important role in our Dante inspired programming framework this year, The Divine Comedy's trilogy of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Needless to say, Samuel Beckett's *Not I* inhabits *Inferno* in this overarching scenario, not least recalling Billie Whitelaw's infamous response to learning the work *"It was like stepping back into hell"*. This programming conceit rises upwards from *Not I* through a series of international art installations – Robert Wilson's video portrait installation *A Still Life is a Real Life* featuring actress Winona Ryder as Ante-Purgatory; Tomoko Mukaiyama and Jean Kalman's live performance installation *Falling* (in the Servants' Tunnel of the 18th century grand house Castle Coole) as Purgatory and completing with Romeo Castelluci's performance installation *Paradiso* atop Mount Lourdes school.

We are very thankful to IMMA and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for their support to help bring this special artwork to the 'west-north-west', a Beckett description! But of course the Festival's gratitude and acknowledgement is best reserved for the artists – Neil Jordan and Julianne Moore – for creating such a beautiful piece in the first place that we are privileged to present to our audiences during the five days of Happy Days 2013.

Sean Doran
Founder-Festival Director
Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival
www.happy-days-enniskillen.com

In 2001 Michael Colgan, Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre, and Alan Moloney of Blue Angel Films concluded the unique and ambitious project of committing all 19 of Samuel Beckett's stage plays to film, with the exception of the early and unperformed *Eleutheria*. The 19 plays each had a different director, charged with adapting the demands of Beckett's plays to film while adhering to his exacting stage directions.

In 2000 Neil Jordan, who was one of the first directors invited to select a play, created a film adaptation of *Not I*, one of Beckett's most mesmerising and disturbing pieces, which he wrote for the stage in 1972. Later that year he donated the film to the IMMA Collection.

Christina Kennedy, Senior Curator, Head of Collections at IMMA, spoke with Neil Jordan about his adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Not I* and more generally about Jordan's own work.

CK: *How did you get involved with the project?*

NJ: Michael (Colgan) wanted to put the entire of Beckett on film in a project called *Beckett on Film*. He came to me and he asked me to choose a play. Initially I wanted to do Beckett's play called *Play*. It's a very evocative piece. You know that Beckett's stage directions are so specific. His nephew Edward Beckett looks after the Estate and this project had to be approved by him. In the end, Edward Beckett didn't think that what I wanted to do with *Play* would meet the directions Beckett had left. So then Michael asked me what else I'd like to do and I chose *Not I*.

CK: *Were each of the film directors approached given their choice of Beckett play to engage with?*

NJ: I don't know. I think they started with me. I remember at the time the thinking was that it would be Irish directors but I said to them, look, everybody loves Samuel Beckett. Everybody is interested. There is not one director or practitioner who has not been affected by him in some way. For example, I said, Roman Polanski wanted to make a version of *Waiting for Godot* years ago. I'm sure even if you asked someone like Andy Warhol, if he was alive today, you'd get some response from him. Even if you went to someone like Stephen Spielberg you would get some memory of Beckett in the guy's brain. You should go to serious film directors. So then Michael went to (David) Mamet and (Anthony) Minghella. I don't know if he every approached Polanski but it was such a wonderful opportunity to engage with this man's work.

CK: *Why Julianne Moore for this part?*

NJ: I had just done a movie with Julianne Moore called *The End of the Affair* and I asked her if she would be interested in doing the Beckett work and she was. So I met her in New York and she read through the piece and rehearsed it. After reading it several times at different speeds, we decided then to do it as part of *Beckett on Film*. So she came to Dublin.

CK: *Will you describe your approach to the play?*

NJ: I wanted to shoot it on film. The piece was about 12 minutes long and I wanted it to be done in one single performance. We had to get these extra long magazines so that we could record it all in one piece, in one single take. The camera man was Roger Pratt who had done *Mona Lisa* and several other films for me. There was no set. The only stage directions Beckett had given was that the actor be confined, their head be kept in a solid position so that the location of the mouth not move and that there be no awareness of anything other than the mouth for the audience. There was one other element in the piece – it was called the Auditor. It was this strange off-stage figure, the listener basically, and I got Edward Beckett's permission to exclude that.

CK: *...in keeping with Beckett's own decision when he adapted* Not I *for film in 1977 to drop the part of the Auditor altogether...*

The only other version of it I'd seen, apart from stage versions, is what Billie Whitelaw did under the direction of Beckett himself. It's quite a terrifying image.

When Julianne entered she sat down in a rig intended to keep the actor in a static position for the performance. I wanted to show that, to show the conditions under which the piece had to be read, the directions that Beckett himself had given to his actors and also the confinement he put the actors under which always seems to be kind of odd, you know?

Basically, it becomes a film about a mouth really. When I shot it we had to shoot it three different times. I chose a series of six angles on Julianne's mouth. Any more than six wouldn't have been possible as you would have shown more than the lips.

When I finished it I remember looking at it and saying to Tony Lawson, we have a strange thing here, a strange object, six views of exactly the same performance. Why don't we just reconstitute the separate takes and show them together. We don't normally get to see the way film operates in that way. So I put them together in one room on six screens presented in the round.

CK: *Many of Beckett's works flow out from the idea of a divided self. Is that what you wanted to achieve in creating multiple views of the mouth?*

NJ: The film is about looking – looking at somebody's mouth. I don't think people look clearly enough at things you know? It was about discovering how many angles I could find on this woman's mouth. It's as simple as that. It's also about if you look at something long enough what it becomes – weirdly sexual and elemental. It was just about that really.

CK: *Have you worked with any other Beckett material?*

NJ: I've never really directed for the theatre but years ago I directed a version of *Waiting for Godot* in America. Nobody saw it. Myself and Jim Sheridan had a theatre group and for some reason we were brought to America by some Foundation to do a bunch of plays in colleges around the Midwest. So I did a version of *Waiting for Godot* with whatever actors we had brought over there. That's my only other encounter with Beckett. I've read all of Beckett's work of course. His letters are extraordinary. In the '20s and '30s he was a great friend of Thomas McGreevy. McGreevy was one of Beckett's few friends actually. In the letters you almost feel that his ideal job would have been as an art curator because he was travelling around Germany in the '30s and in Paris and everything he wrote about involved art. His knowledge of Van Eyck and Flemish and Dutch painting was intense, quite extraordinary actually.

CK: *Did you ever meet Beckett?*

NJ: I never met Beckett. He's almost become a secular saint now hasn't he? It's impossible to be an artist now without having some awareness of Beckett. He's written some incredibly beautiful things. I always feel quite uneasy about Beckett in a way. I think the reverence in which he is held is at times almost insufferable. But yes, there is an extraordinary purity to his work. When I was doing the piece with Julianne, it was a strange thing that happened to me. At times it seemed that everything became unbearably long to endure because the reduction of the piece would actually be silence, yet it's only 12 minutes long. So there's a curious thing that goes on with Beckett but he creates these extraordinary images on stage. The piece itself is quite impenetrable you know? If you try to put together a narrative from it, it is almost impossible. But it does seem to be the experience of being thrown into life somehow and being maddened by sound and then vanishing. It's as obscure and impenetrable as that. But it was fascinating working on it.

CK: *It is sometimes noted in your own work that you seem to speak from a female's perspective as narrator. Is it just a coincidence that* "Not I" *features a woman's voice?*

NJ: that was part of the attraction though its hard to define why really. But Beckett did that quite a bit didn't he? Take Winnie in *Happy Days* and wasn't *Play* narrated by a woman?

CK: *Well, women are the main protagonists in both cases. You mentioned earlier that Play was your first choice to adapt for film, why was that?*

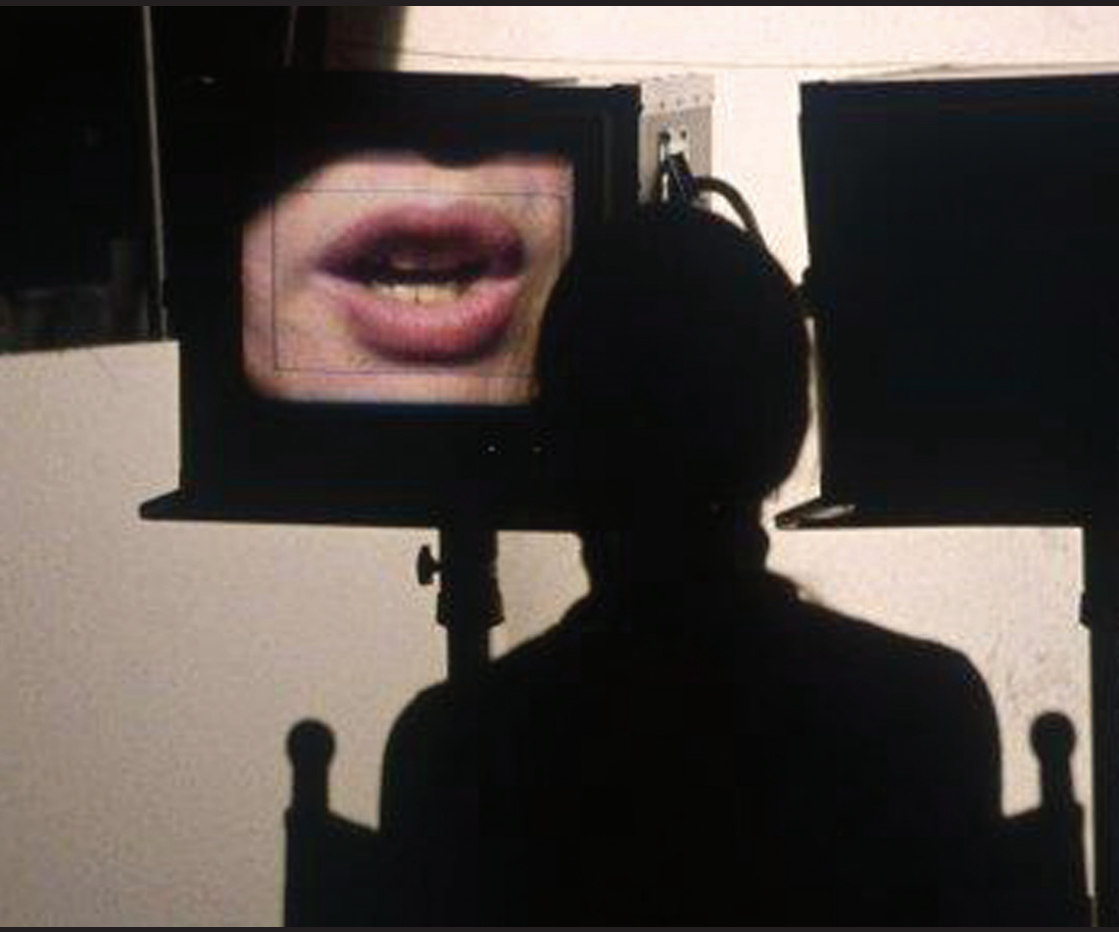
NJ: There was something quite cinematic in *Play*, the fact of three figures, in urns, in a triangular relationship. In many ways it's one of the most conventional stories Beckett ever told, you know? When they suggested the idea of doing Beckett on film I said okay this is something I could really make a film out of and I suggested it to Edward Beckett. He said he didn't want any radical departures from the stage instructions that Beckett left.

CK: *What had you in mind?*

NJ: I would have liberated it from the stage entirely. It would be possible to do that with *Play*. It was like one of those three way relationships that I examine in *The End of the Affair*, you know? But the brief turned out to be different so I couldn't do it. I would have taken them out of the urns.. right out of the earth ..

CK: *Beckett pares his stage sets to the minimum. The few objects he includes seem ordinary yet are also highly metaphoric such as a suitcase, a rope, a mound of earth, an urn, even just a mouth. How do his stage constructions strike you?*

NJ: The main thing Beckett does is that he confines actors. I think everything he does is to remove the element of chance from what the actor will do which often places them in an agonising position. It must be horribly uncomfortable to play Winnie in *Happy Days*. In *Play,* sticking those characters in urns, their very immobility, reminds us that everything has been stripped away from the human condition. The way the actor has to be confined in order to deliver *Not I* is almost ferocious. That's why I showed Julianne sitting down in a kind of torture box necessary for her to keep her face still to deliver the piece. It was a remarkably effective thing that Beckett did. He created extraordinary images but he robbed the stage of movement.



CK: *Writer Sinead Mooney identifies themes in Beckett's works such as incarceration, impotence, the alienated wanderer, characters suspended between existence and non-existence, which she sees as residues of 19th century Gothic tropes. A lot has been written about the Gothic in your work, do the themes she mentions have any resonance for you?**

NJ: If you read Beckett, particularly his prose and his description of the self as being inside this lascerated skull, immobile, I think a lot of it is a very accurate description of the state of being severely hung over, you know? In a strange way, it is. You can't move and every movement makes you aware of your being, your self. Maybe there's a voice in Beckett that is common to Sheridan, Maturin or le Fanu but I think Beckett was far too clever to write the huge 19th century Gothic fictions that they wrote.

CK: *Mooney attributes such themes in Beckett's work to the sectarian-cultural claustrophobia felt by him and the Protestant Irish class in post-Independence Ireland…*

NJ: Beckett's is an Irish Protestant voice without a doubt and there is a huge alienation from his perspective in the landscape he grew up in. Unlike Joyce who wanted to get away from what he belonged to, there is a sense of non-belonging through the whole of Beckett but I think it would be a mistake to call it Gothic. That's just my perspective on it.

CK: *What about the Gothic in your work and the theme of the 'doppelganger' or 'double' which occurs frequently in your writing and films? Many of your characters wrestle with inner demons, they reveal irrational sides, their identities interchange. Your treatment of time seems to echo this with cuts between the present and remembered past, coincidence, déjà vu. Where do you think these traits may come from?*

NJ: You get obsessed with things for reasons you don't understand and I've always like ghost stories, you know? Part of what attracts me to *Not I*, as well, is the concept of things that push explanations of character or events beyond realism. The movies I've made are the perfect medium for that kind of thing, like the *Company of Wolves* or *Interview with a Vampire*. It's a kind of a statement of film-making in a way..

I don't know where this obsession with doubles comes from. I wrote a script called Johnny Montana about a person who found there was another version of himself in the world. I never did anything with it. Then I wrote a short story and the same theme crept in. When I wrote

the novel *Mistaken* the notion of a double obsessed me for a few years.

In the film, *Byzantium*, based on a script by an English writer Moira Buffini, when I came to try solve some problems in her script, rather than follow her more traditional explanation of how the characters become vampires, the central idea is that each character as they turn into a vampire, has to go to this strange space, an ancient kind of beehive hut on an island off the west of Ireland, where they are met and killed by an undead version of themselves. So the idea of the double crept in there too. It seemed to make sense. Its been happening for the past five or six years and I don't know why.

In the novel, *Mistaken*, I was describing Dublin. Since finishing it I find it very hard to be here, I don't know why. It's as though I have written it out of my system or something. Maybe if you spend so much time building an image of the way a place was, you find it very hard to be in the place as it is.

The thing that has always attracted me to the Irish imagination is the Gothic element. I don't think we've ever had a realist tradition. There was never the equivalent of the Victorian realist novel here. It was always to do with the imagination, to do with the unreal – as in Sheridan, Le Fanu, Maturin, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. I don't think the Irish imagination can deal with realism somehow. It doesn't function very well with attempts to do that. Perhaps that's why the Gothic is so much in my work. I don't know why it is so strong in what I do, I'm not the kind of person who can rattle off every vampire movie ever made. But I do remember as a kid being absolutely terrified by Bram Stoker's house. Each time I had to pass it it fightened the life out of me and maybe it's those memories from when I was very young. Going to Fairview Cinema you had to cycle past the Crescent, past his house and the house was very run down at the time, white and ghost like.

* "Ghost writer: Beckett's Irish Gothic" by Sinead Mooney, *Beckett and Ireland*, Edited by Sean Kennedy, Cambridge University Press, 2010, , ps 131-149

CK: *You are known for your interest in art and more than passing references to it in your films and writing. Can you comment on how you think art assists with the development of ideas and imagery in your work?*

NJ: Every time I begin to do a film I start to look at all sorts of references, in that I am just trying to fill my head with things. I don't relate what I do to specific paintings but there can be affinities. When I did *Company of Wolves* I looked at the whole Blake School, in particular Samuel Palmer, with the production designer Anton Furst. I got him to look at those strange moonlit paintings of English villages and we reproduced some of the moments exactly, you know? So yes, I do call on art images at times. When I was doing *Interview with a Vampire*, this sounds incredibly pretentious now, I was looking a lot at Poussin. Not that you relate the observation directly to what you are shooting, you are just using it as a reference.

CK: *So it's more for a mood or an atmosphere?*

NJ: Well, not just that actually. In the last film I did, *Byzantium*, I was looking for locations around Margate where Turner painted all those weird landscapes, well more seascapes really, and eventually we chose Hastings. We had to recreate an idea of what those landscapes would have been like without the civilisations that have grown up around them since, you know? I mean when Turner painted those scenes Margate was just a bunch of fishing huts, wasn't it? When you make a film you try to find common points of reference with the designers, with the lighting and camera men, you know?

When we made *The Borgias* we had to reproduce a lot of paintings in the design of the sets of the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. So we had to go back to see what Pinturicchio had done in the Borgia rooms there. When we came to design the set for the Villa Medici in Florence we reconstructed the series of three paintings of *The Battle of San Romano* by Paulo Uccello. Originally the three panels were in the Villa Medici, unlike today. Researching in this way is one of the pleasures of doing this kind of work.

CK: *What are your views on contemporary artists who work with film and video?*

NJ: Lately there are figures like Steve McQueen and Sam Taylor-Johnson who have entered into film and the technical sophistication of what they do is becoming much more marked. I don't know of many video artists but I think a lot of the work is so technically inept in a way, that it sometimes shocks me. That some people who do this work know so little about photography, about the creation of an image. It's always puzzled me, you know, the naivety with which people who are quite well known artists approach the camera. However, I don't know a lot of their work or that world really. It's quite an interesting one in many ways. Sometimes it puzzles me, what is the difference between what I do and what like say Matthew Barney does or Tacita Dean for example? We're all creating images and we're all questioning images in some way. The only difference is that I have to engage so much with narrative when creating movies. Your psyche as a viewer demands a beginning, a middle and an end. I see the freedom that certain video artists have in doing what they do.

I remember being in New York for the opening of a movie, I forget which movie it was, mid morning, and you wonder how many people are going to be there and you resist the temptation to wait so I went to the Whitney where Bill Viola was showing and there were crowds around the block, right down Madison Avenue. And I thought my god this is obviously entertainment. And the audience for this probably far exceeded that for whatever film it was.

If you did what I do, in other words if I ceased to have to tell a story as it is told in the cinema, the kind of freedom that would present would be incredibly sweet but I don't know if it would be liberating or not. I would like to do more work like this. I just don't know how to do it. I don't know what one does, frankly. It's so interesting when people look at something not as a piece of entertainment but as a piece of art.

For example on the film I've just done, *Byzantium*, there is a sequence in it shot at a waterfall in Cork, quite a huge waterfall actually, and we had to dye the waterfall red, it's a vampire movie you know? So we had to set it up, build steps up the waterfall, arrange a whole series of cables, get hired climbers to go up there up there with red dye that was vegetable-based so it doesn't harm the livestock of the river and local area. Then they stay up there, put in the dye, wait and seven minutes later the whole thing turns red, you know? Photographed in different ways that could be like an art piece. Yet when I do it it's part of a movie, a piece of the story. It's interesting, just different.

Images

Neil Jordan
Not I, 2000, an adaptation for film of the play *Not I*,
1972 by Samuel Beckett, 2000
Directed by Neil Jordan, produced by Blue Angel Films.
6 screen installation with sound
Dimensions variable
Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art
Donation, the artist, 2000
Production still by Pat Redmond,