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**The Unmaking of *Homo Faber*:
Beckett and the Exhaustion of *Technē***

Shane Weller

The early decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion of new technologies, particularly in the fields of communication, transportation, and armaments. One need only think of the telephone, radio, film, motor car, aircraft, and tank to have a sense of just how revolutionary these technological developments were. Unsurprisingly, the impact of these new technologies was soon being registered in literature, the visual arts, and philosophy. Indeed, in the case of the visual arts, with film they brought a completely new art form into being. As for the ways in which this technological revolution was addressed in literature and philosophy, one finds two diametrically opposed attitudes being adopted at the extremes of what was clearly a spectrum of views. At one extreme, there was an unreserved celebration of various technological advances, these being seen not only as embodying the essence of modernity but also as transforming the very nature of human experience in an entirely positive manner. At the other extreme, these same technological innovations were seen as posing a threat not only to European culture, but also to humanity as such. With the long eye of history, following two world wars, the dropping of two nuclear bombs on Japanese cities, the ongoing devastation of the environment, as well as further developments in communication, transportation, and medical science in the post-war period, it is possible to see truth in both positions.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the celebration of new technologies was most evident among the avant-garde, and, above all, in Italian Futurism. Indeed, the enthusiasm for certain forms of new technology in the first Futurist manifesto, published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909, is unqualified: ‘We believe’, the manifesto declares, ‘that this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed. A racing car, its bonnet decked with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath ... a roaring motor car, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.’ (Marinetti, 2011, 5) The manifesto goes on to praise arsenals, shipyards, railway stations,

locomotives, bridges, steamships, and aeroplanes. What is most striking in this hymn to modern technology, and in particular new to modes of transportation, is not only that the emphasis is placed on speed, reflecting a sense of modernity more generally, but also that it is a celebration of warfare as the natural place in which these new technologies can be put most fully to work. The Futurist manifesto identifies war as the ‘sole cleanser of the world’, and through its imagery seeks to evoke in celebratory mode the unprecedented destructive power of modern technology. Motor cars race ‘like machine-gun fire’; bridges flash in the sunlight ‘like gleaming knives’ (Marinetti, 2011, 5). A decade later, the movement’s founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), would co-author another, related text: the Manifesto of the Italian Fasci of Combat (1919), also known as the Fascist Manifesto, for the political movement founded by Benito Mussolini in the same year. The continuity between these two manifestos is clear: for all its reactivation of myth, as well as its political and aesthetic turn back towards imperial Rome, Italian Fascism, like German Nazism a decade later, celebrated new technologies as enabling a new kind of human mobilisation.

This championing of new technologies was far from being limited to the political Right, however. Indeed, one of the greatest advocates of technology’s political power in the first half of the twentieth century came from the Left. In his now celebrated essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), Walter Benjamin argues that the various forms of mechanical reproduction, above all film, have the power to transform the nature of the visual arts. According to Benjamin – in an argument that his friend Theodor Adorno found far from satisfactory, on account of its not being sufficiently dialectical – mechanical reproduction frees the work of art (above all, the work of visual art) from its dependence upon ritual, destroying the ‘aura’ that attaches to the work as something original or unique, an aura that holds the work of art at a distance from the viewer. For Benjamin, rather than being tied to ritual, the mechanically reproducible work of art ‘begins to be based on another practice – politics’ (Benjamin, 1992, 218). The clear implication of this argument is that the introduction of mechanical reproduction into the aesthetic sphere is the most decisive event in the history of the arts, since it brings to an end the ‘cultic’ nature of the aesthetic object, extending all the way back to the origins of art in ritual. With regard to the new art of film, Benjamin contrasts

the camera operator with the painter, arguing that while the painter ‘maintains in his work a natural distance from reality’, the camera operator ‘penetrates deeply into its web’ (Benjamin, 1992, 227). The picture of reality that emerges from these two approaches could not be more different. Whereas the painter’s picture of reality is ‘total’, the camera operator’s consists of ‘multiple fragments’. Given the deep penetration of reality by technology in the modern period, and the consequent fact that reality is now experienced as fragmentary, it is film as a fully technologised mode of artistic production that grants a true image of modern experience. As Benjamin puts it: ‘for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter’ (Benjamin, 1992, 227). The revelatory power of the film camera is such that it ‘introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses’ (Benjamin, 1992, 230). In short, this new technology enables the perception of a modern reality that had hitherto remained hidden to art.

While championing this new technology for its power to disclose a reality to which contemporary human beings would otherwise have remained blind, Benjamin seeks in the epilogue to his 1936 essay to avoid the kind of essentialism or formalism that would identify the nature and function of technology outside of any historico-political context. He argues that, in a capitalist system, the mobilisation of the full range of modern technologies can occur only in war, a point already made by Marinetti. Indeed, in support of this argument, Benjamin cites Marinetti’s aestheticisation of war in relation to the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–6: ‘War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallisation of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns.’ (Marinetti, cited in Benjamin, 1992, 234)

Although Benjamin does not refer to it in his 1936 essay, another important celebration of newly technologised warfare in the interwar period was to be found in Ernst Jünger’s First World War memoir *Storm of Steel* (1920), where the horrors of trench warfare, including poison gas, machine guns, and tanks, are presented in a manner that renders the experience not only heroic but also transformative of human experience.

Jünger would later develop this argument in his essay 'Total Mobilization' (1930), where he argues that the total mobilisation of the national population is necessary if a nation is to win the next great war, and that this mobilisation 'expresses the secret and inexorable claim to which our life in the age of masses and machines subjects us' (Jünger, 1998, 128). Benjamin seeks to distance his own celebration of the power of new technologies from Marinetti's (and thus also from Jünger's) by insisting that while, like the various forms of artistic mechanical reproduction, the use of poison gas also abolishes the aura, it does so in a manner that is not politically liberating. However, the precise distinction between these two technological modes of destroying the aura – namely, film and poison gas – is far from worked through by Benjamin, and he resorts to the rhetorically striking but theoretically (and historically) questionable assertion that while Fascism aestheticises politics, Communism politicises art. Ultimately, then, with regard to the thinking of technology, Benjamin's intervention champions the film camera for its power to disclose a human reality to which we would otherwise remain blind. It is this technology's revelatory power that warrants attention, a point that, as we shall see, proves central to Samuel Beckett's engagement with modern technologies. For Benjamin, it is precisely in the alienating effect of new technologies that their value – that is, their *shock* value – lies. Film technology's power to shock is, according to Benjamin, considerably greater than that of the other arts. As he puts it: 'By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock value.' (Benjamin, 1992, 232)

Unsurprisingly, the alienating effects of modern technology also gave rise to arguments that were considerably less celebratory than either Marinetti's or Benjamin's. Fears regarding the destructive power of modern technologies were already apparent in the interwar years, and only intensified in the post-Second World War, post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki era. One of the most influential approaches to the nature of technology in that later period – and one that, at first sight, certainly appears to be located at the opposite end of the spectrum from those of Marinetti and Benjamin – is that of Martin Heidegger. In his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' (first delivered as a lecture under the title 'Enframing' in 1949, and then in expanded form, and with the revised title, in 1955), Heidegger declares that 'Everywhere we remain unfree and

chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it' (Heidegger, 1977, 4). For Heidegger, modern technology, which is a particular form of a more general *technē*, is to be understood not in instrumental terms but rather, ontologically, as a mode of 'revealing' (*alēthuein; Entbergen*); more precisely, a mode of revealing the Being (*Sein*) of beings. The manner in which modern technology reveals Being is what Heidegger terms 'Enframing' (*Ge-stell*).

Crucially, for Heidegger, modern technology as Enframing stands in stark contrast to the mode of revealing that is poetry (*poiēsis; Dichtung*). Unlike poetry, which, Heidegger argues, is also a form of *technē*, modern technology 'banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering', making of Being what he terms a 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*), a resource to be exploited and used up (Heidegger, 1977, 27). For Heidegger, technology as Enframing is a threat not just to human beings but also to the very history of Being as such, since it 'blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth' (Heidegger, 1977: 28). According to Heidegger, the danger posed by modern technology to the Being of the human cannot be overstated, and it can only be overcome if modern technology's particular way of revealing Being is brought to light through a contrastive comparison with art as *poiēsis*. While the understanding of the essence of technology is crucial, that understanding does not in itself offer the revealing experience of Being that is granted by poetry, and above all by Heidegger's poet of poets, Friedrich Hölderlin. Whereas both Marinetti and Benjamin in their different ways bring art and technology together, Heidegger contrasts modern technology with poetry, with each being a distinct mode of a more fundamental *technē*, understood as the revealing of Being. The history of the twentieth century, with its two world wars and the enduring threat of nuclear and now also ecological Armageddon, would seem to suggest that Heidegger was considerably closer to the truth of modern technology than was either Marinetti or Benjamin.

Within the field of twentieth-century European literature, one also finds writers occupying positions across a spectrum that extends from the unqualified championing of technology to the damning of all things technological. Within this diverse field, Beckett's work is particularly notable because it engages with both the theme of technology and the practice of various modern technologies (radio, film, television), not in order either to

champion or to condemn them, but rather to enact their *exhaustion*. The manner in which that exhaustion is enacted reveals Beckett taking account of precisely those ideas of technology articulated by Marinetti and Benjamin, albeit in a way that subordinates them to a more fundamental conception of *technē*.

In his essay ‘The Exhausted’ (1992), Gilles Deleuze argues that the exhaustion to be found in Beckett’s œuvre is not the wearing out of this or that, but rather the exhaustion of possibility as such. Whereas the tired person ‘has merely exhausted the realization’, the exhausted person ‘exhausts the whole of the possible’ (Deleuze, 1998, 152). In Beckett’s work, this exhaustion of the possible is achieved, according to Deleuze, in three ways: first, through a combinatorial language of names, most notably in the novel *Watt* (completed in 1945); secondly, through a language of voices, most fully in *The Unnamable* (completed in 1949); and thirdly, through a language of images and spaces, above all in the later television plays written in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹ It is, of course, in the television plays that Beckett engages directly with modern technology in the making of the work, as he had already done in the radio plays, beginning with *All That Fall* in the late 1950s, and then with *Film*, in the mid-1960s. In his analysis of exhaustion in Beckett’s œuvre, however, Deleuze does not address the precise manner in which Beckett exhausts technology; rather, he champions the technology that is television as the means by which Beckett carries the aim of exhausting the possible to its limit, since it is a medium that is not restricted to the verbal. In television, Deleuze writes: ‘there is always something other than words, *music or vision*, that makes them loosen their grip, separates them, or even opens them up completely.’ (Deleuze, 1998, 173; Deleuze’s emphasis) How, then, does Beckett exhaust technology? To address this question, it is necessary to chart his engagement with the nature of technology in his earliest work – at the thematic level, in the early 1930s – through to his employment of various forms of modern technology from the 1950s to the 1980s. As we shall see, Beckett’s exhaustion of technology passes by way of a deployment of the idea of modern technology as a mode of revealing a deeper reality that is shared by Benjamin and

¹ Deleuze asserts that ‘No doubt this language [of images and spaces] is born in the novels and the novellas, and passes through the theatre, but it is in the television that it accomplishes its own mission, distinct from the first two [languages]’ (Deleuze, 1998, 162).

Heidegger, and that also stands in stark contradiction of Marinetti's celebration of speed as the essence of a fully technologised modernity.

Modes of technological communication serve repeatedly in literary texts of the first half of the twentieth century to suggest alienation, distance, or, paradoxically, a failure of communication. Among the most striking examples of a particular technology serving this purpose is Jean Cocteau's play *The Human Voice* (*La Voix humaine*), written in 1928 and first performed in Paris in 1930. In Cocteau's one-act play, a young woman, alone on stage, is speaking on the phone to the male lover who is abandoning her for another woman, the audience only hearing the woman's side of the conversation, which thus takes the form of a fragmented monologue. The breakdown in the lovers' relationship, and the woman's consequent isolation, are evoked through the technological device itself: the communicative tool here representing distance, absence, a sundering of human relations. The technology itself proves to be faulty, the conversation being repeatedly interrupted by other voices and by disconnections. The woman's anxiety at this technological breakdown in the communicative link is captured by lines such as the following: 'Hello, is that you, dear? is it you? Yes it's very difficult to hear you sound ever such a long way off' (Cocteau, 1979, 21); 'You think you're dead. You can hear but you can't make yourself heard' (30); 'there's a buzzing at your end of the line' (30); 'Hello, Exchange, we've been cut off' (31). By the end of the short play, having referred to her recent failed suicide attempt, the woman declares her love for the man who is abandoning her, refusing to blame him for abandoning her. Her isolation is complete, and her future captured visually by the image of the falling telephone receiver: 'Be quick. Break off. Break. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you (The telephone receiver falls to the floor.)' (48)

A similar use of the telephone to evoke the profound isolation of the individual, and an apparent breakdown in relations, occurs in a work published almost a decade before Cocteau's play: Marcel Proust's *The Guermantes Way* (1920–21). Staying with his friend Robert de Saint-Loup in Doncières, in north-eastern France, Proust's narrator takes

advantage of the recently installed telephone to speak with his grandmother in Paris. As the Proust scholar Adam Watt observes, the technological instrument isolates the grandmother's voice 'from the visual support that usually accompanies it; as a result, rather than being comforted, the Narrator detects a sadness and fragility he had never previously discerned in her voice' (Watt, 2011, 64). The passage in question reads:

suddenly I heard that voice which I mistakenly thought I knew so well; for always until then, every time that my grandmother had talked to me, I had been accustomed to follow what she said on the open score of her face, in which the eyes figured so largely; but her voice itself I was hearing this afternoon for the first time. [...] this isolation of the voice was like a symbol, an evocation, a direct consequence of another isolation, that of my grandmother, for the first time separated from me. [...] 'Granny!' I cried to her, 'Granny!' and I longed to kiss her, but I had beside me only the voice, a phantom as impalpable as the one that would perhaps come back to visit me when my grandmother was dead. (Proust, 1981, 135–7)

This scene struck the young Beckett as particularly important, not simply because it registered the alienating effects of a particular modern technology, but because that technology had a revelatory function. In loosely Heideggerian terms, the technological device here reveals the grandmother's true being, hitherto obscured by the veil of habitual perception. In *Proust*, his 1931 monograph on *In Search of Lost Time*, Beckett comments at some length on the passage. As so often in *Proust*, Beckett takes up parts of Proust's text, translating and then blending them with his own analysis. On the above passage, for instance, he remarks that Proust's narrator

hears his grandmother's voice [on the telephone], or what he assumes to be her voice, because he hears it now for the first time, in all its purity and reality, so different from the voice that he had been accustomed to follow on the open score of her face that he does not recognize it as hers. It is a grievous voice, its fragility unmitigated and undisguised by the carefully

arranged mask of her features, and this strange real voice is the measure of its owner's suffering. He hears it also as the symbol of her isolation, of their separation, as impalpable as a voice from the dead. (Beckett, 1965, 26–7)

It is because the telephone serves a double purpose here – both to alienate and to reveal, or to reveal precisely by way of alienation – that Beckett considers Proust's text to be infinitely superior to Cocteau's *The Human Voice*. In Cocteau's play, which Beckett dismisses as an 'unnecessary banality', the telephone serves simply as a symbol of the breakdown in relations between the two lovers. In Proust's novel, however, as Beckett reads it, the technological device is a mode of revelation, a means by which the veil of habit is rent asunder and the 'strange real voice' of the narrator's grandmother is heard. Here, the modern technology serves to disclose the reality beneath all appearance. The (natural) voice is estranged by the technology, which enables the hearer for the first time to apprehend the voice as it really is, stripped of the context of the human face. What is heard by way of this technology is 'unmitigated' and 'undisguised', these two 'unwords' indicating the negativity that, for Beckett, is required to reach the essential.² Later in his book on Proust, Beckett attempts a first articulation of the negative aesthetic that will shape his œuvre over the next sixty years: 'The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy' (Beckett, 1965, 65–6). That negative activity is precisely what is achieved, according to Beckett, by the technological device of the telephone in Proust's novel. In his analysis of the scene, then, Beckett anticipates Walter Benjamin's conception of the film camera only a few years later.

Given the attention that he devotes to the Proustian telephone as a revelatory technology, it is unsurprising that Beckett should introduce a telephone scene into the opening chapter of his first published novel, *Murphy*, written only a few years later, in 1934–6, and published in 1938. In that novel, the telephone in question has served as a prostitute's means of communication with her potential customers. Just as he later mechanises Proustian involuntary memory in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), thereby

² On Beckett's deployment of 'unwords' more generally, see Weller, 2019, ch. 4.

demeaning it, so in *Murphy* Beckett reimagines the Proustian telephone call between grandson and beloved grandmother as that between an ageing prostitute and her clients. In *Murphy*, then, this modern technology is associated with the theme of human ageing, and the increased dependence upon technological devices that comes with that decline in physical powers, a theme to which Beckett returns in later works, most notably *Endgame* (1957). In *Murphy*, Beckett writes of the prostitute: ‘The telephone that she had found useful in her prime, in her decline she found indispensable. For the only money she made was when a client from the old days rang her up.’ (Beckett, 2009e, 6) When Murphy’s girlfriend, Celia, calls him on this telephone, the device disturbs his withdrawal from the ‘outer world’. The telephone’s ring is violently disruptive: it ‘burst into its rail’; its ‘loud calm crake [...] mocked him’. Rather than disclosing the real, then, the telephone in Beckett’s novel is the means by which the ‘outer world’, from which Murphy wishes to escape, drags him out of himself and back into relations with others. When the telephone call has ended, Murphy listens to the ‘dead line’, before dropping the receiver to the floor (Beckett, 2009e, 6–8). Abandoning the telephone here signifies withdrawal from the social world.

Beckett’s remarks on the ‘strange real voice’ that is heard when the human voice is ‘unmitigated’ and ‘undisguised’, as a result of a particular modern technology, point beyond his use of the telephone in *Murphy* to his later attempts to strip the voice of its natural context – the ‘open score of the face’, as he, following Proust, puts it. In each case, a modern technology is required: in *Not I* (1972), it is the spotlight on the mouth, with the rest of the face occluded, as well as the adaptation for television of the original stage play. And in his other television plays, Beckett on more than one occasion has a voice for which there is no corresponding face: the voices in *Eh Joe* (1966) and *Ghost Trio* (1977) are examples of this alienation of the voice by technological means.

Returning to Beckett’s reflections on modern technologies in *Proust*: immediately following his analysis of the telephonic effect in *The Guermantes Way*, Beckett follows Proust by referring to the camera as another modern technology with a revelatory function. Like the telephone, the camera discloses the reality beneath the veil of habit. When, having returned anxiously to Paris to see his grandmother, Proust’s narrator encounters her in person, he sees her in a new way:

The process that automatically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph. [...] I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, a dejected old woman whom I did not know. (Proust, 1981, 141–3)

Of this scene, Beckett observes that Proust's narrator's eye:

functions with the cruel precision of a camera; it photographs the reality of his grandmother. And he realises with horror that his grandmother is dead, long since and many times, that the cherished familiar of his mind, mercifully composed all along the years by the solicitude of habitual memory, exists no longer, that this mad old woman, drowsing over her book overburdened with years, flushed and coarse and vulgar, is a stranger whom he has never seen. (Beckett, 1965, 27–8)

On the basis of these two examples, one might reasonably anticipate that Beckett would go on to become one of the great champions of modern technology on account of its revelatory power. And, indeed, if one considers his wish to study cinematography with the great Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein in the mid-1930s, and the fact that, in a letter to Eisenstein dated 2 March 1936, he identifies himself as a 'serious cinéaste',³ his use of the reel-to-reel tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape*, which is set 'in the future' precisely so that the technological device can be used (Beckett, 2009c, 3), as well as his readiness to write for radio, cinema, and television, there certainly seems to be considerable evidence to support this interpretation of his engagement with technology as a means to disclose the reality beneath the veil of appearances spun by habitual modes of perception. Beckett's post-war engagement with radio, film, and television undoubtedly testify to his willingness to embrace modern technologies in order to find new ways of

³ In his letter to Eisenstein, Beckett stated: 'It is because I realize that the script is [a] function of its means of realization that I am anxious to make contact with your mastery of these, and beg you to consider me a serious cineaste worthy of admission to your school.' (Beckett, 2009d, 317)

exploring his vision of what, in his unbroadcast text for radio, ‘The Capital of the Ruins’ (written in 1946), he terms ‘humanity in ruins’ (Beckett, 1995, 278).

The nature of Beckett’s engagement with technology is, however, more complicated than that, and the clue as to why it would be wrong to see Beckett as one of modern technology’s unambiguous champions is also to be found in his book on Proust, in the passage following the comparison that he makes between the narrator’s eye and a camera. In the two examples of modern technology on which Beckett dwells there – the telephone and the camera – he insists on both occasions that what is revealed is death: the voice on the telephone is ‘as impalpable as a voice from dead’, and, of the face when it is seen, Proust’s narrator ‘realises with horror that his grandmother is dead’. This connection between modern technology and death, which he takes from his reading of Proust, is subsequently made in Beckett’s own work, in various ways. In the radio play *All That Fall* (1957), for instance, a child dies as a result of having fallen – or perhaps having been pushed – under the wheels of a train: ‘It was a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma’am. [*Pause.*] On to the line, Ma’am. [*Pause.*] Under the wheels, Ma’am.’ (Beckett, 2009a, 31–2) A more personal association between the same modern technology and death occurs in a postcard sent by Beckett in the summer of 1950 from Ireland, where his mother was dying: ‘My mother’s life continues its sad decline. It is like the decrescendos of a train I used to listen to in the night at Ussy, interminable, starting up again just when one thinks it is over and silence restored for ever.’ (Beckett to Henri Hayden, 31 July 1950, cited in Knowlson, 1996, 382; translated by Knowlson) This relation between technology and death can also be inverted, as it is in *Film* (1965), where the camera pursues O and prevents him from achieving the desired state of ‘non-being’ (Beckett, 2009a, 97). In his first play for television, *Eh Joe*, Beckett again refers to the camera’s ‘pursuit’ of a character (Beckett, 2009a, 113). The use of the modifier ‘cruel’ in his remarks on the camera in *Proust* sets the mood for his later engagements with technology.

If, for Beckett, there is indeed an essential relation between technology and death, then that relation takes two principal forms. First, as we have seen, technology’s power to reveal appears to be a revelation not of life but of death: it discloses the ostensibly living as the already dead. This is what might be termed its ruthless proleptic power: the

technological device anticipates the death that is to come. One of the most influential analyses of this relation between a specific technology and death is Roland Barthes's book on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), published shortly before its author's own death and the argument of which is shaped to the core by Barthes's grief following the death of his mother. For Barthes, the art of photography (and herein his proximity to both Proust and Beckett is absolute) is an art of death. The photographic image is that of a being who no longer is – the moment it records is gone. As Barthes puts it:

By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (Barthes, 1993, 96; Barthes's emphasis)

For Barthes, like Proust and Beckett before him, a modern technological device reveals the catastrophe of death in advance. It makes death present before the fact. It destroys time; more precisely, it destroys the lifetime, and drags us into the time of death – the time of the so-called future perfect.

There is, however, a second relation between technology and death to which Beckett first refers us in *Proust*. For, if technology is in some sense fatal, it is itself also profoundly mortal. As Beckett insists in the paragraph following the one in which he compares the eye of the narrator to a camera, the habit-destroying power of technology is strictly time-bound. As he puts it: 'The respite is brief.' For habit reasserts itself, and the glimpsed reality is lost. Habit effects, he argues, 'a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds' (Beckett, 1965, 28). In other words, the revelatory power of technology is fleeting. It cannot be relied upon to provide us with any enduring experience of the real.

Here, derived in no small part from his reading of Schopenhauer at the time he was working on his book on *In Search of Lost Time*, Beckett's deeply avant-garde

approach not just to art but also to perception and cognition becomes clear. The artist whose aim is to penetrate to what Beckett terms the ‘core of the eddy’ cannot rely enduringly on a particular mode or manner, or indeed on a particular technology. The nature of perception, and, more generally, of human being-in-the-world, is such that the artist has constantly to seek new means; not just new stylistic devices, but new technological ones. For, as Heidegger observes, *poiēsis* is itself a form of *technē*, if the latter is understood as a ‘revealing’ (*Entbergen*). Any strict opposition between *technē* and *poiēsis* breaks down here, and one has to recognise that both modern art and modern technology belong to *technē* in this broader sense as modes of disclosure. This helps to explain why it is that Beckett should have constantly sought out new technological devices, and was ready to explore the possibilities first of radio, then of film, and lastly of television. To rest content with any one technology would have been inevitably to fall victim to habituation. The veil would soon obstruct the cognitive-perceptual apparatus. So it is that, for Beckett, the revelatory potential of modern technologies is necessarily exhausted. His work stands as testimony to that principle of exhaustion.

Beckett’s sense that any particular technology (conceived as a mode of revealing) is necessarily time-bound is, however, only one aspect of his exhaustion of *technē*. For the exhaustion of the revelatory power of a particular technology can, of course, be overcome by the invention of a new technology, and Beckett’s engagement with the exhaustion of technology is ultimately more fundamental than that, becoming nothing less than an exhaustion of *technē* as such. Significantly, this dimension to Beckett’s work emerges in the post-war period, following his own experience of the ruination wrought by certain modern technologies during his time working at the Irish Red Cross Hospital at Saint-Lô in Normandy, where he witnessed first-hand the devastation wrought by aerial bombardment. In Beckett’s post-war work, rather than simply proving destructive, technological devices repeatedly fail or break or are discarded. This failure and/or discarding of technologies is particularly intensive in *Endgame*. The alarm clock, the telescope, and the gaff are all discarded in the course of the play, leaving Hamm stuck in a wheelchair that he cannot move. It is hard to think of another work of twentieth-century literature that stands in starker antithesis to the celebration of the ‘beauty of speed’ in the first Futurist manifesto. From Marinetti’s ‘roaring racing car’ on an Earth that is ‘hurtling

at breakneck speed along the racetrack of its orbit', to the static wheelchair in *Endgame*'s final tableau, following the discarding of various technological means for achieving movement (the gaff), the mechanical recording of time (the clock), and the shortening of distances (the telescope): Beckett's play enacts not just the exhaustion of one or more technologies, but the exhaustion of technology as such.

This exhaustion of technology is an integral part of Beckett's sceptical approach to the European Enlightenment idea of progress. At the heart of Enlightenment thinking is the belief in the possibility, and, for some, even the inevitability, of social, political, and scientific progress. Hegel's philosophy of spirit (*Geist*) is perhaps the most fully developed philosophical version of this progressivist model, although it owes as much to Christian theology as it does to the Goddess of Reason. Unlike his French contemporaries Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, both of whom championed his post-war work and with whom he is often compared, Beckett showed not the slightest interest in Hegel's philosophy. Rather than to Hegel, it was to the German Idealist's great opponent, Arthur Schopenhauer, that Beckett was drawn, and thus to a philosopher who considered the notion of progress to be an illusion. Beckett's work clearly belongs to the sceptical tradition that sees in human history evidence not of any socio-political progress, but rather of circularity (as proposed by Giambattista Vico) or even of sheer chaos. In his 1929 essay on James Joyce's 'Work in Progress', Beckett refers to Vico's 'exposition of the ineluctable circular progression of Society', arguing that it is one important source for the kind of purgatorial experience that is enacted in Joyce's work. According to Beckett, there are two forms of Purgatory. In the Dantean form, 'movement is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance'; in the Joycean form, 'movement is non-directional – or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back' (Beckett, 1983, 20, 33). It is this latter form that is adopted by Beckett throughout his oeuvre. As Adorno was among the first to recognise, if there is a dialectic in Beckett's work, then it is at a standstill. The Beckettian 'on' takes us nowhere.

The horrors of twentieth-century history would certainly appear to support this sceptical view of human history. And yet, that scepticism rarely extends to the history of technology. Indeed, those same horrors – from the two world wars to Hiroshima and Nagasaki – were only possible as a result of technological progress, albeit one that did

not map onto any form of socio-political progress. Even those who are highly sceptical about the possibility of socio-political progress are often ready to concede that technology is the one realm in which progress has been, and will continue to be, made, notwithstanding the fact that those advances may prove to be as deleterious as they are beneficial to human life. Beckett's work, however, cannot be co-opted to such a position, for it includes technology within a more general disintegration or running down that is enacted so compellingly in a work such as *Endgame*. There, technology is also caught within a cycle of failure. Beckett certainly never abandons technology; indeed, he engages with new technologies in an almost systematic fashion from the 1950s to the 1980s. However, his work enacts the exhaustion of technology as a process that is interminable, since that exhaustion results in no liberation *from* technology, any more than there is in his work any sense of a liberation *through* technology.

In his post-war work, then, Beckett charts and indeed enacts the exhaustion not just of technologies but of *technē* as such. We witness the recurrent failure of all manner of technological forms, a (repeated) failure that discloses an image of the human not as *homo faber* but rather as what might be termed *homo labefactus*, for whom all making entails a *labefaction*; that is, a weakening or unmaking – not least, of the very conception of the human that underlies so many Western philosophies and anthropologies. The vision of 'humanity in ruins' to which Beckett refers at the end of his unbroadcast radio script 'The Capital of the Ruins', is, in part, a vision of this *homo labefactus*.

This exhaustion of *technē* in Beckett's œuvre is far from being limited to modern technologies of the kind to which Marinetti refers. For, as Heidegger observes, *poiēsis* is, like modern scientific technologies, itself a *technē* in the more fundamental sense of the term. The exhaustion of *technē* that characterises Beckett's post-war work extends beyond the failure or discarding of what are usually thought of as technologies to the *technē* that is *poiēsis*. Beckett's last work, *what is the word* (1989), is perhaps his most fully realised exhaustion of *poiēsis* as a form of *technē*. For in that work, the 'revealing' – the *Entbergen*, to use Heidegger's term – that is the essence of technology, fails to take place. That which is to be named in the poem remains unnamed, leaving only the decidedly mechanical repetition: 'what is the word – // what is the word' (Beckett, 2009b,

135). That is what remains for Beckett's *homo labefactus*: the mechanical repetition of the unfound word at the end of a tottering text.

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