"whole body like gone": Beckett and Technology

By Ulrika Maude

Technology has a prominent presence in Samuel Beckett's work. Beckett's fascination with radio, film, and television are obvious examples, but the textual strategies of modernist writing can themselves be seen as analogous to technology; in Beckett, this is further perpetuated by the endless repetitions and permutations in the texts that, as Hugh Kenner has argued, anticipate information code and function as a "proto-computer-language" (96). Technology also has a prominent actual presence in Beckett's writing. The stage and media works famously incorporate a tape recorder, a megaphone, and loudspeakers, as well as other prosthetic devices such as a telescope, spectacles, and lenses. Examples of prostheses can also be found in the prose works, most obviously in Molloy's bicycle and crutches, Malone's stick, or the "phial" in *The Calmative*, which functions as one of the several markers of medical technologies in Beckett's writing (*Complete Short Prose* 74). In this essay I shall focus on the ambiguous role of technology in Beckett's television plays, with particular emphasis on perceptual technologies.

In 1945, in the aftermath of World War II, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty published his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he argued that the body, instead of being a mere object in the world, forms the foundation of all human experience. For Merleau-Ponty, we are conscious of the world through our bodies, or even more accurately, the body is the very condition of our having a world. Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty stresses the primacy of perception, which functions as the interface between the self and the world, and therefore mediates and brings into being the relationship between the subject and his or her surroundings. Beckett's work, though having significant points of divergence with Merleau-Ponty's writing, does share his interest in perception, as the minute attention Beckett devotes in his prose and drama to the experience of seeing, hearing, and touching testifies. One could even characterize some of Beckett's works as phenomenological reductions into the nature and functioning of the various senses.

As Karl Marx observed in *Das Kapital*, originally published in 1867, the human senses have a history, and one could argue that one of the most radical paradigm shifts in that history occurred during the so-called second Industrial Revolution in which major perceptual technologies, such as the telephone, the gramophone, photography, and cinematography entered popular consumption. Furthermore, such groundbreaking visualizing techniques as the X-ray, invented in 1895 by Wilhelm Röntgen, revolutionized medical practices, which also had a radical impact on the popular imagination. As Ezra Pound argued: "You can no more take machines out of the modern mind, than you can take the shield of Achilles out of the *Iliad*" (77).

One of the recurrent ways of making sense of new technologies has been to conceptualize them precisely in relation to the human body, as forms of prosthetic devices that function either as instances of organ- or sensory-extension, in a positive sense, or as a form of organ replacement, to make up for an individual deficiency or lack.[1] An example of the former would be the telephone, which enhances the perceptual powers of the human ear, and indeed was modeled on the anatomy of the ear, with its vibrating tympanum. As an example of a technological device that was originally designed to supplement a lack one could offer the typewriter, first devised in order to enable the blind to write. Freud, one of the most famous early commentators on technology, indeed argued that "[w]ith every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning" (279). In 1930, Freud wrote in his now seminal essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

> Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When
> he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but
> those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him
> much trouble at times. (280)

Beckett, whose works pay minute attention to both different forms of perception and technology, examines—particularly in his mature work—the manner in which these auxiliary organs change the way in which we see, hear, and more generally perceive the world, producing in us a double-perception that differs from earlier modes of perceiving. If perception establishes our relationship to the world, then perceptual technologies, by default, have an impact on that relationship, and Beckett, ever attuned to these questions, sets out to examine this impact.

Beckett's television plays and his late drama are famous for the dissociation of protagonist from voice: *Eh Joe, Ghost Trio,* and *…but the clouds…*, as well as

the stage plays *That Time, Footfalls,* and *Rockaby,* are a few examples. Critics have proposed a number of ways of approaching this dissociation or doubling in Beckett's drama, suggesting, for instance, that the dissociated voices stage the inner monologue of the self-reflexive mind. However, especially in cases in which the monologue is overtly and explicitly technologically mediated, as in the case of *Ghost Trio*, these kinds of interpretations pose a number of problems. What I shall argue instead, then, is that these plays stage an analysis of the manner in which perceptual technologies produce in us a bifurcation or double take of different modes of perception.

Vision provides perhaps the most prominent example of the impact of new technologies on the way we perceive the world, and a brief summary of the history of vision reveals that "[a]t least since Plato," vision and reason have been seen to be virtually analogous to one another (Connor, "Between" 91). For Aristotle, for instance, sight was the supreme sense because it resembled the intellect most closely, "by virtue of the relative immateriality of its knowing" (Flynn 274). The association of sight with reason only became heightened in Cartesian thought. In fact, in his essay "The Age of the World Picture," Heidegger characterized the essence of modernity itself as the age in which the world is "conceived and grasped as picture" (129).

Without delving into this issue too deeply in this context, the association of vision with knowledge does have a long tradition in Western thought. This association, however, while not exactly changed in the last one hundred years or so, does become modified with the advent of new technologies, and in particular, of course, technologies of perception, those prosthetic devices that Freud and others—one could mention, for instance, the media critic Marshall McLuhan—have characterized as enhancing the human senses.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, or more accurately toward its end, new technologies emerged that were designed to "chart, explore, and record sensory phenomena that [it] had never been possible to perceive" (Danius 19). Etienne-Jules Marey's stop-motion photographs of flying birds and running horses turned physiological action invisible to the human eye into visual records and data (Danius 19). Early photographic procedures had not been "sensitive enough to record moving subjects," and "anything that moved produced blur on [the] silver plate" (Braun 43). To study the flight of birds, Marey invented a camera in 1882 with magazine plates that recorded a series of photographs; the pictures could then be combined to represent movements. Marey's chronophotographs, developed in 1888, in turn, consisted of multiple exposures on single glass plates and strips of film that passed automatically

through a camera of his own design. Chronophotography had an important impact on science, for instance studies of muscle function. It also left its mark on the arts, such as twentieth-century photography; many even consider Marey the real inventor of motion film. In 1894, Marey adapted the motion-picture camera to the microscope, and subsequently inaugurated microscopic film, which further enhanced the discrepancy between the now-fallible human eye and technologically mediated vision.

Röntgen's development of the X-ray exposed the human skeleton and other organs within the now *living* body. The device, which for the first time turned the body inside out without surgical intervention, made human beings more aware of their state of embodied being by revealing physiological processes and detailed anatomical information previously unavailable in living subjects. X-rays, furthermore, not only collapsed the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body, but also between "the public and the private; specialized knowledge and popular fantasy; and scientific discourse, high art, and popular culture" (Cartwright 107). However, the X-ray and other imaging techniques that followed in its wake also somewhat problematically reproduced two-dimensional images of the body that transformed or reduced the living organism into pixels, graphs, and information code, suggesting the body's rewritability. Imaging techniques therefore had a drastic and duplicitous impact on the way in which twentieth-century artists, intellectuals, and the popular imagination conceived of the question of embodiment.

Both Marey's and Röntgen's methods enhanced the human eye and appropriated scopic ideas of knowledge, while simultaneously underscoring the limitations and lack in human, embodied vision. The radical, new visual technologies opened up a gap between subjective, human, ultimately fallible vision, and the so-called objective vision of technology and visual inscription methods. This awareness of the limitations of human vision had already begun in the first half of the nineteenth century, and even the end of the eighteenth, with studies on such issues as retinal afterimages, as Jonathan Crary has argued. However, figures such as Goethe, in the early nineteenth century, treated the topic much more thoroughly than previous researchers had done. The importance of afterimages was that they revealed "the presence of sensation in the absence of stimulus"―in other words, that the eye, on occasion, perceived things that were not there (Crary 98).[2] Several studies were conducted, for instance, to measure afterimages, and although their length varied according to circumstance, the discovery was made that the images lasted, on average, one third of a second. These kinds of revelations, in turn, triggered the development of a number of devices, initially for the "purposes of scientific observation but . . . quickly

converted into forms of popular entertainment" such as the "thaumatrope (literally, 'wonder-turner') first popularized in London by Dr. John Paris in 1825" (Crary 104-05). Another gadget was the stereoscope that produced three-dimensional images by emulating the functioning of human vision.

The human eye now appeared deficient and limited in its abilities in comparison with new technologically enhanced methods of seeing and recording sensory data, and Beckett's work documents this new experience of seeing. Molloy, in the *Trilogy*, wanders in a landscape he finds treacherous and alien, one that he can no longer master by casting his gaze over it. Molloy has to conclude, for instance, that even though certain objects on the horizon may appear to be close, in reality they are probably much farther than the subject suspects, and "often where only one escarpment is discerned, and one crest, in reality there are two, two escarpments, two crests, riven by a valley" (*Molloy* 11).

The human eye and the information it renders is perspectival, and perception, memory, and imagination have a tendency to exchange functions and merge into one. In Beckett's 1946 novella, *The Calmative*, the verb "to see," in its different declinations, is mentioned seventeen times, the verb "to look" five times, and the verbs "to gaze," "to eye," and "to focus" each appear twice. Amongst further vision-related verbs in the novella figure "to appear," "to loom," and "to shine"—all within the space of a sixteen-page text. There are also a number of visual adjectives, such as "blind," "glittering," and "radiant" (*CSP* 62, 73, 75). The emphasis on vision, furthermore, is only heightened by repeated references to a peculiar silence, and to the recurrent failure of vocal articulation. The novella, in other words, appears very much like a phenomenological reduction or analysis into the nature of visual experience. When the narrator comes across the ramparts, he says, "Cyclopean and crenellated, standing out faintly against a sky scarcely less sombre, they did not seem in ruins, viewed from mine, but were, to my certain knowledge" (*CSP* 63). Rather than providing the narrator access to an instantaneous comprehension of the scene, vision is from the outset described as prone to miscalculations. A distinction is made between what the eye sees and the narrator knows, hence problematizing the received relationship between vision and rationality. The narrator mentions the stars he sees on the horizon, and again distances sight from reason by pointing out that they are "not to be confused with the fires men light, at night, or that go alight alone," for both fires and stars, seen from the narrator's vantage point, look all too similar (*CSP* 69). In *The End*, another one of the 1946 novellas with a striking emphasis on vision, Beckett's narrator mentions the sky, which he gazes at "without focussing it, for why focus it? Most of the time it was a mixture of white, blue and grey, and then at evening all the evening colours"

(*CSP* 93). From his abode, the narrator says, "the eyes rose to a confusion of low houses, wasteland, horadings, chimneys, steeples and towers" (*CSP* 95). Again, a coherent whole refuses to present itself; instead, the human eye encounters only "confusion" (*CSP* 95). When the narrator reaches the river, he retorts, "Here all seemed at first sight more or less as I had left it. But if I had looked more closely I would doubtless have discovered many changes. And indeed I subsequently did so" (*CSP* 82). The knowledge the human eye renders is inaccurate and misleading; in fact, not really *knowledge* at all. In the 1964 *Film*, Beckett uses a special gauze filter to render the experience of blurred, imperfect eyesight. Beckett, that is to say, is acutely aware of the limitations of the human eye. As David Michael Levin has argued, writing about the phenomenology of vision:

> What happens when we stare intensely at something? Instead of clear and distinct perception, blurring and confusion; instead of fulfillment, the eyes lose their sight, veiled in tears; instead of stability and fixation at the far end of the gaze, we find a chaos of shifting, jerking forms as the object of focus violently tears itself away from the hold of the gaze. (69)

Beckett's 1975 television play, *Ghost Trio*, is considered by many to be his finest work for television. Michael Billington characterized the play as "a mesmeric piece of painting for the TV" (*Guardian*), and it offers one of the most probing analyses of the new bifurcated experience of seeing. As critics such as Crary and Danius have observed, technology, while underscoring the limitations of the human eye, also liberates it from its association with knowledge, enabling a more sensuous, aestheticized experience of vision. This is reflected in the multiple movements in the visual arts modernity has experienced—impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, and so forth—that have tended to privilege color over line and beauty over fact: Beckett's numerous writings on the visual arts reflect his awareness of and interest in these new modes of seeing.

Modernist art works, in other words, begin to explore the subjective nature of perceptual experience. Indeed, the opening shots of *Ghost Trio*, which Daniel Albright describes as "a game with superimposed rectangles" (136), bear a closer resemblance to a Mondrian than to modern drama. "Compared to the earlier *Film* and *Eh Joe*, the setting has been radically reduced. Whereas *Film* and *Eh Joe* offer lit spaces that include discernable naturalist details, furniture, windows, and doors that however strangely shaped may represent an individualised setting," *Ghost Trio* "shows a rectangular box, dominated

by unnaturally even and smooth grey rectangles, in floor, wall, door, window, mirror, pallet, pillow" (Voigts-Virchow, "Exhausted" 229-30).

Indeed, in the 1977 Süddeutscher Rundfunk production *Geister Trio*, which Beckett himself directed, even the Male Figure is at first indistinguishable from the objects in the room, and appears himself to form but yet another rectangle (Voigts-Virchow, "Exhausted" 230). The fact that the Male Figure is unrecognizable as such until the camera zooms in at the end of act 1 once again draws attention to the miscalculations of the human eye. Other objects, too, such as the cassette, Beckett's directions make clear, are at first "*not identifiable at this range*" (*CDW* 409). In fact, the "props are so schematically represented that a voice-over is needed to confirm their identity" (Prieto); there is in *Ghost Trio* "a deliberate play on the disparity between 'looking' and 'knowing' that leaves the spectator aware of the strangeness and the ambiguity of what he is observing" (Knowlson, "*Ghost Trio*" 198). The female voice of the play not only urges the spectator to "Look" (*Complete Dramatic Works* 408), but to "look closer" (*CDW* 408), and to "Look again" (*CDW* 408, 409). As Jonathan Kalb has observed, "The imperative 'look again' in part one applies not only to the rectangles but also to the rest of the play and, by extension, to the other television plays. . . . 'look again', Beckett seems to say, not only at the picture at hand but at the way you looked the first time, at how that may have been inadequate" ("Mediated" 140). *Ghost Trio*, then, is yet another "example of Beckett incorporating the viewer's process of viewing into his drama" ("Mediated" 140).

Several critics have drawn attention to *Ghost Trio's* melodramatic subtext, and Sydney Homan, James Knowlson, and others have pointed out that the play's working title was "Tryst," which only heightens our sense of the play's sentimental subject matter, namely, that of the Male Figure waiting for a woman who never appears. When Beckett directed the play at Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart, Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, who was the director of SDR at the time, recalls looking, together with Beckett and in accordance with his wishes, for a boy with "a moving face" for the German production of the play (Müller-Freienfels).[3]

The play is divided into three acts that Beckett names "Pre-action," "Action," and "Re-action." In the first two acts, "The disembodied female voice . . . uses extradiegetic direct access: it directs the representation and equates the camera eye and the viewer's eye by giving orders to the viewer that the camera vicariously obeys" (Voigts-Virchow, "Face-Values" 125).[4] The fact that what the audience sees in act 2 is repeated in act 3 partly explains the title of the third

act, "Re-action." The act is also a "reaction," however, for what the audience now sees, as Eric Prieto has suggested, also "changes drastically . . . [for] the camera begins to alternate between a long view of the entire room and views that are taken from the first-person perspective of F, as if we were looking through his eyes" (Prieto).

There is, in other words, a discrepancy between *Ghost Trio's* austere, geometric set with its embedded rectangles, and the play's sentimental subject matter, that of a man waiting for a woman who never appears. This discrepancy is reflected in the two different types of focalization we encounter in the play: that of the camera, and that of F; external and internal or extradiegetic and intradiegetic, to use terms familiar from film theory.

Something similar is at stake in the sound track of *Ghost Trio.* The voice in the play foregrounds its own technologically mediated quality, not only by having a "flat and unearthly" tone, as Knowlson has observed (*Damned* 621), but also by explicitly stating, in the opening lines of the play:

> Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [*Pause.*] Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [*Pause.*] It will not be raised, or lowered, whatever happens. (*CDW* 408)

Beckett made clear from the start of the play that the voice is technologically mediated. As in the case of the camera, in the first two acts of the play, it will not render what F, the Male Figure, hears, but only the objectively mediated voice in all its flatness and lack of depth. Nor will it, unlike the human voice, show affect, "whatever happens" (*CDW* 408). As Daniel Albright has suggested, "[m]any of the voices in Beckett's late plays seem determined to unvoice themselves" (134), and the "unvoicing" here has its roots in Beckett's interest in technology. Never once do we hear what F thinks he hears, namely the sound of the absent woman that triggers his movements and prompts him to look behind door and window. However, in act 3, as Prieto has argued:

> not only are we able to hear the music from A, and for longer periods of time, but we also hear the creaks of the door and window as they open or close, and rain falling outside the window. It is also at this point that the camera begins to [render] the first-person perspective of F, showing us the view out of the window and the appearance of the boy at the door. (Prieto)

Each of these views may also be available to F in act 2, but because the focalization is that of the camera, we do not see what F sees. Beckett is foregrounding the difference and discrepancy between the human eye and ear, which are tinged with emotion, memory, and imagination, and the objective camera eye and recorded voice, which give us the clinical, objective "truth." The various manuscript versions of *Ghost Trio*, held at the Beckett International Foundation Archives, highlight this point. Especially striking is the first holograph manuscript, MS 1519/1, which reveals the importance of the camera's perspective from the very early stages of the play's conception. Beckett plans each camera move, whether "close up," "near shot," or "fade out" with meticulous detail, particularly in the so-called "III SYNOPSIS." The length, in seconds, of each shot, is also included in the manuscript. This attention to camera moves, though revised, finds its way through the various manuscript drafts into the final version of the play.

In RUL MS 1519/3, a carbon typescript of *Ghost Trio* entitled "Notes on Tryst," Beckett states, in the instructions for the camera, "Once set for shot it should not explore, simply stare. It stops and stares, mainly in vain."[5] Human vision, in contrast, may have more in common with touch than static staring. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> From the point of view of my body I never see as equal the six sides of the cube, even if it is made of glass, and yet the word "cube" has a meaning; the cube itself, the cube in reality, beyond its sensible appearances, has *its* six equal sides. As I move round it, I see the front face, hitherto a square, change its shape, then disappear, while the other sides come into view and one by one become squares. (203)

The eye, in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of vision, explores the various sides of the cube in a temporal manner, moving around its surface successively, as in a caress. Beckett's treatment of human vision, in his various works, seems to attest to a similar kind of temporal, exploratory mode of seeing, that F also engages in in acts 2 ("Action") and 3 ("Re-action") of *Ghost Trio*.

In this way, Beckett stages the manner in which perceptual technologies, by being more objective, stark, and "reliable" than the human eye and ear, not only differ from but perhaps also liberate human perception from its association with rationality and objectivity, freeing it for sensuous, subjective, and aestheticized perceptual experience. If technology does the quantifiable seeing and hearing for us, human perception is freed for qualitative sensory experience.

...but the clouds…, *Ghost Trio's* companion piece, shares the former play's emphasis on human, vulnerable vision, for like F in *Ghost Trio*, M in the 1977 BBC version of *...but the clouds…* is virtually indistinguishable as a human figure in the opening shot of the play, in which he is "sitting on invisible stool bowed over invisible table" (*CDW* 417). In the 1977 Süddeutscher Rundfunk version of the play, *…nur noch Gewölk…,* which Beckett directed in Stuttgart, "the basic shot of M bent over the table, which was already hard to recognize as a human figure in the BBC version, is enlarged even further so that it appears only as an obscure shape; one sees it initially as an abstract composition and only gradually comes to read it as a partial view of a man after the camera returns to it fifteen times" (Kalb, *Beckett* 114-15). The subjective, fragile nature of M's own visions of W, the woman V begs to appear, is highlighted in V's line, "For had she never once appeared, in all that time, would I have, could I have, gone on begging, all that time?" (*CDW* 420).

In "The Tower" (1928), which famously inspired Beckett to write *...but the clouds…*, William Butler Yeats writes:

> Never had I more
> Excited, passionate, fantastical
> Imagination, nor an ear and eye
> That more expected the impossible – (95-96)

An eye and ear that expect the impossible are what *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds…* stage, for both plays are about the subjective, yearning human eye and ear. Knowlson, writing about the largo of Beethoven's Piano Trio No. 5 that Beckett chose for the music in *Ghost Trio*, observes that the bars:

> capture a sense of tense expectation which may be regarded as one of the main links between Beethoven's dark motifs and the play which, until very late in its preparation, Beckett had entitled *Tryst*. Before the end of the movement there is even a slight lightening of mood and a hint of hopefulness . . . which may well encourage the waiting figure to persist with his vigil and perhaps partially explain the strange, haunted, half-smile that flickered on the face of the actor, Klaus Herm, at the end of Beckett's production. ("*Ghost Trio"* 201)

The cassette player and the Beethoven largo that F so intently listens to are not only further examples of the now qualitative nature of human perception, they also point, as so many of Beckett's plays, to the autonomization of the

senses, triggered percisely by such devices as the telephone, gramophone, and audiotape, that no longer require the direct involvement of the full sensorium.

Ghost Trio and *…but the clouds…* can be read as examinations into the manner in which technological inscription methods such as cameras, recording devices, and various imaging techniques that do the seeing and hearing for us produce in us a double-perception that differs from earlier modes of perceiving. For Beckett's late television plays, in their historicization of perception, suggest that while technologically mediated ways of seeing and hearing differ from the human eye and ear, they also liberate the senses from their association with rationality, and in the process, transform our perception of the world.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Armstrong 77-105.

2. Beckett himself refers to afterimages in *Murphy* and *Watt.* I owe this point to Chris Ackerley and Marcel Fernandes's hitherto unpublished "'By Christ! He Did Die': Medical Misadventures in the Works of Samuel Beckett."

3. This information is from Müller-Freienfels's unpublished manuscript, entitled "Samuel Beckett: 'We Do It to Have Fun Together.' (Erinnerungen an Beckett in Stuttgart)," held at Südwestrundfunk archives. I am indebted to Dr. Jörg Hucklenbroich who kindly granted me access to this material. Warm thanks are also due to Stephan Spering for his generous help and assistance at SWR.

4. Voigts-Virchow's point, however, is not entirely accurate, for as Knowlson has observed, on occasion, V either "makes mistakes and gets the order wrong or she exercises uncertain control over [F]" ("*Ghost Trio*" 198). For a meticulous mapping of the BBC and SDR productions of the play, see Knowlson's essay "*Ghost Trio/ Geister Trio.*"

5. I am grateful to The Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library for permission to quote from this manuscript.

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