CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Theatre, Medium, Technology

> All our lives we had been taught not to know things – which was the way of the ancient world – but to be able to find them. That was what the tech grid gave us: infinite knowledge at our fingertips so that we didn't need to keep any of it in our heads.
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> A. J. Hartley, *Cathedrals of Glass: A Planet of Blood and Ice*

> [WINNIE *finishes lips, inspects them in mirror held a little further away.*] Ensign crimson. [WILLIE *turns page.* WINNIE *lays down lipstick and mirror, turns toward bag.*] Pale flag.
>
> Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* 142

Early on in her heavenly day, Winnie primps, recalling another, younger woman's ambiguous immobility, as Romeo describes it, "Beauty's ensign yet / Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks, / And death's pale flag is not advanced there" (5.3.94–6).[1] Beckett's lovers are hardly in Verona; they're older, more jaded, staged in a blistering apocalyptic landscape. And Shakespeare's language is no longer poetry, as it remains, perhaps, when Hamm quotes Prospero in *Endgame* ("Our revels now are ended" 120); it would take only a gesture from the actress – inspecting the lipstick tube – for "Ensign crimson" to register as advertising, the lingo of labels.[2] Shakespeare and other poets appear throughout Beckett's plays – "My kingdom for a nightman!" Hamm roars (*Endgame* 102) – and this texture of dramatic reference is part of Beckett's long-recognized effort to mark the medium as the message: the "anguish of perceivedness" in *Film* (324), the endless repetition of a dramatic *now* in *Waiting for Godot*, the narrations that frame an exiguous presence in the radio plays.[3] But this metadramatic impulse requires a technical armature, and Beckett's works for stage, radio, television, and film locate the dramatic action within precise technological affordances. As Bernard Stiegler suggests, theatrical and recording technologies don't serve merely to represent dramatic-action-as-knowledge; they are themselves "*concretions* of knowledge and abilities in objects and

devices passed on as *things belonging to the human world*," articulating a "mnemo-technical dimension" that bears "the memory of gestures and functions" across time (*Symbolic Misery* 1: 7).[4]

Theatre is always about its *tekhnē*. Winnie lives a proscenium theatricality – invisible fourth wall, "*Blazing light*" (138), piercing bell "as shrill and wounding as possible" (Beckett, *Letters* III: 428) – and the theatrical space that reifies Beckett's dramatic writing is a specifically modern instrument: the proscenium house, "as closed a box as possible," as Beckett told director Alan Schneider (quoted in Beckett, *Theatrical Notebooks* 1: 98). Like the grave trap or the limelight or live-feed video, the theatrical instrument that realizes Beckett's essentializing drama is not an essential theatre, but a moment in the evolution of performance technologies: a "theatre" cognate with a silent audience ("a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy," *Endgame* 106), technicians who stock the stage, placing the four or five leaves on the tree to open the second act of *Waiting for Godot*, lowering the tantalizing props of *Act Without Words I*, filling Winnie's improbable bag and incinerating her parasol in *Happy Days*, operating the lights as offstage Luke does in *Catastrophe* or, more challengingly, directing the "unique inquisitor" of *Play*.

Beckett described Mouth as "purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and a purveyor of a stage text," noting to Schneider that "The rest is Ibsen" (quoted in Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* 70). That *rest* is crucial to Beckett's theatre, dramatizing its engagement with theatrical technicity. Despite its disorienting minimalism, the familiar exigency of Beckett's dramatic world – no more bicycle wheels – locates the power of naturalist theatrical technology, its rich theatricalization of an active object world. Beckett's stage is frontal, has concealed lighting and sound equipment, wings (Krapp's closet, Clov's kitchen), and sometimes access to the house (the Director in *Catastrophe*, Vladimir's trip to the loo in *Godot*). Beckett's plays inhabit the dark house and the illuminated stage enabled by the electrification of the theatre in the late nineteenth century, and its distinctive ways of locating the artwork in the social process of attending the performance, marking when the dramatic event begins, pauses, and ends. Beckett's appropriation of this technology for dramatic purposes – lowering the house lights signals that *Play* and *Not I* are beginning, though in those plays the dramatic narrative is (always) already underway – registers the degree to which his imagistic articulation of an essentialized drama is imagined within historically and ideologically specific technical resources, resources identified in the middle decades of the twentieth century *as theatre*.

Beckett's representation of the interface between writing and acting also essentializes and so represents another dimension of modern theatrical technicity, its intermedial interface with the play-as-book, with print. "Me – [*he yawns*] – to play!" (*Endgame* 93): Beckett's characters are consigned to a space of visibility in which an oddly displaced and displacing form of presence is required, the vehicle for making speech from imposed, disconnected fragments of text, text that, in the case of *Ohio Impromptu*, is read onstage. On Beckett's stage, the script, the text, orders and directs the materials of performance, particularly the scenic function of performing bodies: in *Play*, the text calls for "*Voices toneless*" and "*Rapid tempo* throughout" (*Play* 307), and the actors are disciplined to a theatrical discourse of textual *delivery*, articulating "it" (*What Where* 472) or "*it*" (*Rough for Radio II* 276) regardless of its comprehensibility; in *Play*, the words are "just 'things' that come out of their mouths" (George Devine quoted in Knowlson, ed., *Samuel Beckett* 91), "speech is being literally wrung from them" (Beckett, *Letters* III: 560).[5] In Kenneth Burke's terms (see *Grammar of Motives* xv–xxiii, 3–20), the representational economy of the proscenium stage assigns priority to the dramatic *scene* to govern the ratio between *scene*, *act*, *agent*, *agency*, and *purpose*, a modern rhetorical priority inflecting the coeval technicity of modern dramatic publishing: all those long, detailed stage directions (think Ibsen, Shaw, O'Neill). Beckett's plays recognize this priority in their infamous stage directions, too, but his texts increasingly direct not the dramatic but the theatrical scene, the technological infrastructure of the stage: "The source of light is single and must not be situated outside the ideal space (stage) occupied by its victims" (*Play* 318). Ibsen's scripts describe a realistic fictional setting that bears on its characters; Beckett's scripts describe a modern theatrical scene that inscribes the actor's work in its available technology. And, of course, though Beckett's characters occasionally gesture toward the auditorium, "that bog" (*Godot* 16), the audience is typically figured in an interpretive rather than a dialogic or kinetic engagement with the stage, its attention sometimes represented (as by the spot in *Play*) as a means of ensuring its absence from the dramatic spectacle: "Make sense who may" (*What Where* 476).

Beckett's exploration of the signifying technicity of theatrical performance is instructively visible in his alternative investigation of recorded performance, radio, television, and film.[6] He foregrounds radio technology in a range of ways, such as the cavalcade of "*Rural sounds. Sheep, bird, cow, cock, severally, then together. Silence*" that opens *All That Fall* (172), less a realist sonic environment than a demonstration of the sound technician's

toolkit. Beckett's radio plays are written for a specific technical instrument, too, a radio with analog tuning knobs of the kind He instructs She to operate in *Rough for Radio I*: "you must twist. [*Pause.*] To the right" (268). To find *Embers* on the radio with analog tuning technology – I'm thinking here of the background sound of the "*Sea scarcely audible.* HENRY'S *boots on shingle. He halts. Sea a little louder*" (*Embers* 253) – requires pausing one's search along the dial on the station during the spoken dialogue, since the sound of the sea and the shingle will be indistinguishable from static. "That sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand. [*Pause.*] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was" (*Embers* 253). Beckett's radio plays thematize a specific technology of production, the voice emerging not from the dark but against the background of white noise that is its technical medium. Performance depends on and dramatizes its prosthetic apparatus. Analog radio signals an audible space between, a virtual space that evaporates with digital tuning. Digital radio articulates a different performance, a different playing, since the play is always *there*, precisely *there*, found at the touch of a button.

Beckett's television articulates a cognate foregrounding of performance technicity. Though color was available, Beckett preferred black and white, and the figure of the room – the "*Smooth grey rectangle*" of *Ghost Trio* for instance (408) – is his televisual scene. Beckett's television camera is not hand-held, but rides a dolly, and so is inscribed in the scene, too, except for that moment – "*Cut to close-up of mirror, reflecting nothing. Small grey rectangle (same dimensions as cassette) against larger rectangle of wall*" (413) – when it has been cunningly edited out of the scene (see Brater, *Beyond Minimalism* 95). In the era of black-and-white television, the grey rectangle works like the sound of the waves and shingle in *Embers*: reifying a blank, evenly grey rectangle difficult to distinguish from technological noise, the *snow*, that visual noise defining the airwave signal, at least on pre-cable, pre-digital television sets.[7] Beckett's television also rigorously discriminates sound and image, as its most characteristic televisual feature is its use of voice-over, intensifying a convention most familiar from television soap opera. The voice sometimes directs the camera and, as in *Ghost Trio*, addresses the audience – "Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly" (408); on other occasions, . . . *but the clouds* . . . for instance, it is the narrating consciousness of the principal character that's voiced, and in *Eh Joe* a voice that seems to occupy the figure's mind as the camera focuses and encloses his face in its perspective, the sound and space gripping the visible subject.

Beckett's work in live and recorded media was prescient, foundational to the technical world, and the technicities of performance, we now inhabit. "Outside of here it's death" (*Endgame* 96): the apocalyptic feel of many of Beckett's plays and recorded dramas, the sense of a present out of history – the past "a million years ago, in the nineties" (*Godot* 12) – or of narrative forced into a survival wilderness where only bits and pieces of culture remain suggest Beckett's implication of the anxiety fantasy of the early third millennium in the West.[8] Didi's nightmare – that without mnemotechnological resources it's impossible to persuade Gogo that "things have changed here since yesterday" (56) – is given point in contemporary culture, where the interrogation of what Don DeLillo calls the "sense of being virtualized" has ignited a pervasive anxiety across all media, from Ben Marcus's novel *The Flame Alphabet*, or the survival theatre of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, to novel series-to-film series like *Divergent* and *Hunger Games*, to television series like *Revolution* and many others. If there is a single figure incarnating this anxiety nimbus, it's the zombie: having outsourced so much of our thinking, having distributed so much of our cognitive work, to our laptops and iPhones and home appliances, aren't we all zombies already? From the challenges of translating dramatic and theatrical culture to the antipodes informing the performance of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, to the deteriorating mnemotechnology that Nahum Tate's *King Lear* provides in Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*, to Maria Irene Fornes's prescient *The Danube*, theatre has persistently engaged the consequences of menemotechnological collapse. Beckett's work, though, foregrounds the political implication of theatrical technologies of representation, materialized by the implication of aesthetic in punitive technesis in plays like *What Where* and visualized as the climax of *Catastrophe* (dedicated to imprisoned Czech dissident writer, later president, Václav Havel). The lights come up on the suffering Protagonist (another sly reference to Greek theatre, the "first contestant"), tortured as "our" spectacle by the instruments of theatre: "There's our catastrophe," says the Director; "Now . . . let 'em have it. [*Fade-out of general light. Pause. Fade-out of light on body. Light on head alone. Long pause.*] Terrific! He'll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here" (460–1).[9]

Krapp is surely the avatar of this tech-led anxiety, whose tape-stored memories speak with greater life than the aged carcass operating the machine. *Krapp's Last Tape* is the drama of recorded performance, the tapes storing the sometimes forgotten words of lost Krapp, such as "viduity" (219), inscribing sometimes forgotten events recorded in that

other failing mnemotechnology, the ledger – "Memorable equinox?" (217).[10] As the interplay of ledger and machine implies, Krapp's "prosthetic" memory is not a special case: it is the only case, as Stiegler suggests – the "being of humankind is to be outside itself" constituted by its prosthetics (*Technics* 1: 193). The alternative to technological prosthesis is devolution, which may be irresistible in any event: sinking into the environment like Winnie, being caught where Didi and Gogo are, unable to know the present as distinct from yesterday, trapped in the theatre's vanishing point of a mysteriously determined, uncannily repetitive present. "Ah yesterday!" (*Endgame* 99).[11] For despite Vivian Mercier's famous comment that in *Waiting for Godot* "nothing happens, *twice*" (*Beckett/Beckett* 74), much of the action of Beckett's theatre consists in repeating with a difference or, more accurately, rendering the question of *binary* difference, and so of presence, undecidable. Pozzo and Lucky are visibly changed, but in the many repetitions and reshufflings of action, gesture, dialogue, can an audience really know what, if anything, has happened twice? Beckett's plays at once assert the modern theatre's logic of textual reproducibility and its deliquescent relation to the technologies of memory, a gesture his plays perform again and again: think of the several triphammer-fast narratives of Mouth in *Not I*, the sequential torturing of Bim, Bam, Bem, and Bom in *What Where*, and of course most famously the final stage direction of *Play*: "[*Repeat play.*]" In its command of a specific technical apparatus, Beckett's drama precisely calibrates theatre as a technical prosthetic, as his advice to an actor playing Krapp suggests: "become one with the machine" (quoted in Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* 89).[12]

In its algorithmic series of coded instructions, much of Beckett's writing for theatre and other media anticipates the rhythms of computer encoding, and occupies the disappearing edge of the theatre of the book: after all, despite Beckett's insistence on the determining force of stage directions, what his plays most urgently witness is an anxiety regarding the persistence of print, the book, the text and its ability to enforce action in the theatre.[13] Writing as performed narration – from Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot* ("Think, pig!" 41), to Nagg's joke and Hamm's chronicle in *Endgame*, perhaps to the "it" of *What Where* – courses through Beckett's plays, and through Beckett's vanishing characters, often as forgetting: "What have I said?" (*Godot* 85). The plays' constant auto-reproduction – *Godot*'s Act II, *Play*'s repeat, Mouth's resumption of the third person after each "what? . . . who? . . . no!. . . she!" (*Not I* 377), the digital elegance of Bom, Bim, Bem, and Bam – tends to emphasize the interaction between a

logocentric textuality and the dynamics of reperformance, in which behavior necessarily remakes its script, simultaneously surrogating (see Roach, *Cities*), summoning, and displacing its authority. Beckett's theatre strikingly engages the problematic of Richard Schechner's "restoration of behavior" ("Collective"), as each night of *Godot* or *Endgame* or *Not I* or *Happy Days* is "Another heavenly day" (*Happy Days* 138) in the sequence that the play implies as interminable, to speak in the "old style" (*Happy Days* 143), and at the same time reperforms *the* day of enactment: "One day, is that not enough for you [. . .] the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?" (*Godot* 83). From the Wooster Group's *Poor Theatre* and *Hamlet*, to Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*, to the investment in venues like Shakespeare's Globe Theatre or the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars, contemporary theatre is haunted by the desire to reanimate past performances, and perhaps also haunted by the lesson of Beckett, that reanimation may be indistinguishable from deanimation, that mnemotechnologies of performance produce that presence as a function of prosthetic exteriority. Theatre shares its medial horizon, in this sense, with other forms of "social" media, in which the present and the absent, the immediate and the mediated, the live and the virtual are entangled rather than discrete.

Theatre – representative of what N. Katherine Hayles calls "the legacy systems of speech and writing" (*My Mother* 39) – works by remediating its technological predecessors, and so enables an alternative kind of reflection on and through Beckett's dramatic production in and through different media. Beckett recognized that the actor could not operate the tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape*; the theatre remediates tape recording, using prerecorded dialogue broadcast from speakers operated from the booth to represent the work of the machine onstage. Today, Krapp's humanity is prostheticized not by an emergent technology but by a lost one: send your prop-master out for a reel-to-reel tape recorder and a box of tapes. While Krapp's decaying body is matched to what was an emergent technology assimilated to the theatre's appetite for the new, but is now a theatricalized technological antique, *Krapp's Last Tape* relies on the motivating assumption of a text-based theatre; and yet, although the book appears to restore a performance, the script is always undone in the theatrical medium, passing into and out of the technologies of memory, as Winnie puts it, struggling for the words that appear to legitimate performance: "What is that wonderful line? [*Lips.*] Oh fleeting joys – [*lips*] – oh something lasting woe" (141). The theatre of the tape is, now, archaeological, but the theatre of the book was, perhaps, always so.

Beckett's many parables of devolution cannot restore the virtuality of a print-culture past, in part because theatre cannot realize the book, and more suggestively because, as Hayles has observed, bodies are themselves understood as already hosting the virtual: "Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (*How We Became Posthuman* 13–14). "Pale flag," indeed. Beckett's stage bodies are traced by virtualizing narratives implying that theatrical technology virtualizes all its equipment, including its human machinery: "the machine . . . so disconnected . . . never got the message . . . or powerless to respond . . . like numbed" (*Not I* 378).[14] The intermediality of Beckett's platform tends to anatomize the interaction between technologies – and especially embodied technologies, acting, gesture, speech – already in a sense assimilated to or as theatre. Machining the actors down to specific organs of expression – Joe's face, Mouth's voice, "Every man his speciality," as Hamm puts it (*Endgame* 97) – Beckett's plays might be understood to locate the moment of resistance, where the performing body cannot *do* the text, but must remake it, and do so in a theatre that divides the actor's body into different medial technologies, voice, gesture, movement, facial expression, much as it divides the stage into strictly segmented performance areas (the strip of *Footfalls*) and equipment (the spot).

This theatrical dynamic is allegorized by the striking moment in the television play *Ghost Trio* when the Figure (F) departs from the Voice's ambiguous narration. For Beckett, the Voice is "a distant, anonymous, indifferent voice," with "no relation that I know of" to F, "observing and presenting from a distance, rather than manipulating," a "sort of astral presenter," whose "tone is colourless and unvarying from start to finish" (Beckett, *Letters* IV: 464).

19. V: Now to pallet.
20. F *goes to head of pallet (window end), stands looking down at it. 5 seconds.*
21. F *turns to wall at head of pallet, goes to wall, looks at his face in mirror hanging on wall, invisible from* A.
22. V: [*Surprised.*] Ah!
23. *After 5 seconds* F *bows his head, stands before mirror with bowed head. 2 seconds.*
24. V: Now to door.
25. F *goes to stool, takes up cassette, sits, settles into opening pose, bowed over cassette.* (410–11)

Like Mouth provoked but not informed by the spot, the Figure performs alongside but not at the direction of the Voice. He is seen and displaced by the camera, which at once follows him and occupies his perspective. The camera, like the Voice, is not quite personated, either; as Beckett noted it "should not explore, simply stare. It stops and stares, mainly in vain" (quoted in Maude, *Beckett's Technology and the Body* 122).

Ghost Trio allegorizes the technological intermediality characteristic of modern performance, its complex interaction of a fully technologized space, instrumentalized performing bodies, and a script, discriminating the intermedial components of performance to assert their dialectical interaction. Mouth's narration is a "purely buccal phenomenon without mental control or understanding, only half heard. Function running away with organ" (Beckett, *Letters* IV: 311). Where the realist theatre tends to subordinate its intermedial technicity to the coherence of the dramatic *scene*, and Shakespearean drama is often understood to urge the subordination of theatrical technicity toward the projection of *character*, Beckett's work, whether on the stage or in recorded media, discriminates and disseminates its constituent media, articulating a performance in which the discourse of performance itself is anatomized, a principle essential to Beckett's own direction: he instructed actors "'Never to let your changes in position and voice come together" (*Theatrical Notebooks* II: xix). The fantasy of immediacy remains a technologically mediated opportunity. The signification of theatre as medium is not distinct from the technologies of its making.

Indeed, as an intermedium, television is only now approaching the medial complexity of theatre, a "technology" that represents "technologies," and in so doing uses them to define the place, the social, cultural, and aesthetic function of theatre itself. The technologies I have in mind here are not only those represented in the drama: social technologies like juridical proceedings in *The Eumenides*; representational technologies like the printed book Hamlet uses to goad Polonius; visual recording technologies like the camera that freezes the action of *Three Sisters*; audio recording technologies – box three, spool five – reanimating *Krapp's Last Tape*; interactive and (much the same thing) surveillance technologies like the cellphone of Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* or the video cameras of Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet.* I am also thinking of the technologies that have historically defined the place, practice, and *medium* of theatrical performance: the architectural structure of the theatre space and the available instruments that stage and so define how and so what dramatic performance means – *periaktoi*, *ekkyklemai*, grave traps, chariot-and-pole,

electric elevators, rear projection, live tweeting, all alongside the constantly changing technologies of acting. There's no essential theatre apart from its apparatus, Hamlet's sterile platform or Hamm's shelter, as the theatre is always technologically turning, much as David Wills has remarked: "The human is, from the point of view of this turn, understood to become technological as soon as it becomes human, to be always already turning that way" (*Dorsality* 4). Whatever *theatricality* may be *as a medium*, theatre is unimaginable without the tools and technologies it practices, which define its intermedial work as a constant exchange in which "the dynamic of the *who* itself redoubles that of the *what*: conditioned *by* the *what*, it is equally conditional *for* it" (Stiegler, *Technics* 2: 7).

Even epitomized as "two boards and a passion," theatre is inseparable from its technological armature, the boards that define and delimit the material zone of performance, elevating it to visibility, and the conventions of acting marking that distinctive behavior, passion, as signifying and significant.[15] Theatre is often represented as engaged in a conflictual accommodation with the succession of performance-recording media: theatre/film, theatre/TV, theatre/digital media. Yet, the notion of a straightforward technological succession is illusory; while some technologies (film projection) obviate their predecessors (the magic lantern), new technologies typically redefine the purpose and utility of the technologies and instruments they succeed but cannot replace (the iPad has not replaced the pad of paper). Digital technologies are today part of the apparatus of theatre, not its other. And like theatre, technologies have a *longue durée*, in which their affordances change as they come to interact with emergent technologies and changing social practices. Much as the rise of print transformed the theatre's cultural relation *to* – though much less its practical use *of* – dramatic writing, the "storage" function of plays-in-print has also been altered by digital technologies; YouTube is an archive of legible performances, including productions of Beckett's video works, certainly the principal venue of their performance today, no doubt providing the "text," so to speak, for theatrical performances, too. Although a literary perspective on theatre takes dramatic writing as determining performance, it might be more accurate to understand theatrical production today as more directly influenced by three technological formations: print and print-emulating publication; photography and film, which as Philip Auslander cannily observes, created the category of "liveness," of "live performance" (*Liveness* 52); and electricity, which enabled just about everything distinctive of modern theatre to happen – the darkening of