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Beckett's exhausted media

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The concept of media in Beckett has to be defined as neither a form of representation nor as a technical apparatus, nor as a symbolic system but, rather, as a means to render something visible and audible that would otherwise be beyond perception or the scope of attention. If we begin to inquire into what Beckett has to say to media studies about the vexed question of how the concept of media can be defined, the issue of exhaustion will arise. Exhaustion is to human subjects what Beckett's works are to media. From the perspective of psychophysiology and psychiatry, exhaustion is a dangerous state that will lead to apathy, self-destruction and, finally, the death of the subject. From the perspective opened up by philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his essay on Beckett's plays for television, 'L'Épuisé', exhaustion is located on the threshold between the breakdown of the subject and the invention of an unforeseen possibility (Deleuze, 1992, 57–106; 1995, 3–28; 1998, 152–74).

Deleuze uses the term exhaustion for two different states. Exhaustion indicates a psychophysiological state but is also 'an abstract concept' (Clément, 2006, 134) which designates a sense of an ending because everything that is or seems possible has been acted out or has been under consideration. There is a dialectics between the state of exhaustion and what remains possible. Exhaustion seems to be a condition for the invention of new possibilities, or as Deleuze puts it: 'One can exhaust the joys, the movements, and the acrobatics of the life of mind only if the body remains immobile, curled up, seated, somber, itself exhausted' (1998 169). The more exhausted someone is, however, the more unlikely it is that a new possibility will emerge, but the emergence of a new possibility requires the exhaustion of the given situation.

The 'combinatorial' (Deleuze, 1998, 145) seems to be an analytical tool or even the key to understanding exhaustion because whatever has happened, happens and will happen is always already determined by the very conditions

which shape the situation: ‘Must one be exhausted to give oneself over to the combinatorial, or is it the combinatorial that exhausts us, that leads to exhaustion?’ (154). The combinatorial explains on a higher or more abstract level than performance itself what kind of logic, programme, or formula could be found behind the phenomenon of exhaustion. If Deleuze seems to understand ‘health as a horizon of creation’ (Clément, 2006, 134), it is doubtful, however, whether literary innovations will happen under conditions that will bring destruction and death. The threat that psychophysiological exhaustion poses, however, often seems to be overlooked or disclaimed. People are exhausted because they are living and working under conditions they cannot bear and have not voluntarily chosen. The situations in which Beckett’s *dramatis personae* are living can be understood, as Adorno did, as mere survival: ‘Beckett’s characters behave in precisely the primitive, behavioristic manner appropriate to the state of affairs after the catastrophe, after it has mutilated them so that they cannot react any differently; flies twitching after the fly swatter has half-squashed them’ (Adorno, 1991, 251). It is for that reason necessary to frame the issue of exhaustion in political terms and to be aware, precisely, as are Beckett and Deleuze, that people have been tortured and murdered by, for example, forced labour and malnutrition, which exhaust them and will, eventually, bring death (McNaughton, 2018, 120; Morin, 2017, 156–7; Knowlson and Knowlson, 2006, 86). The crucial question then is what drives people beyond the threshold of tiredness and into a state of exhaustion.

Although Deleuze deals with Beckett’s media works, especially the TV plays, he neither considers any medium in particular nor does he use media-specific terms in his essay. Rather, he uses the notion of ‘image’ in order to tackle the basic problem of a simplified media theory which draws a sharp distinction between technical apparatus and content or, in more traditional terms, between form and content (Uhlmann, 2006). Nevertheless, the concept of media seems to be helpful for understanding Deleuze’s claim. One can, of course, define the medium as a device for representation, as technical apparatus, as a system of symbols or as an interplay between representation, symbols and apparatus. Beckett, however, has subtracted from theatre, radio, film, or television whatever is not absolutely necessary for the functioning of his plays and media works. The effect of this subtraction is that the plays are stripped bare to their *dispositifs* and realise unforeseen possibilities.¹

1

In the nineteenth century, physiologists, psychologists and psychiatrists started to discuss the concepts of fatigue and exhaustion. The Italian physiologist Angelo Mosso was the first to investigate fatigue systematically in the 1860s

by recording the performance of experimental subjects (Rabinbach, 1992, 133–42). He demonstrated that one of the most specific characteristics of an individual's life is the way he or she gets tired. It is inevitable that humans get tired, but everyone gets tired in an individual way. Mosso also showed that fatigue alters the personality once a certain threshold is transgressed: 'Extreme fatigue, whether intellectual or muscular, produces a change in our temper, causing us to become more irritable; it seems to consume our noblest qualities – those which distinguish the brain of the civilized from that of savage man. When we are fatigued we can no longer govern ourselves, and our passions attain to such violence that we can no longer master them by reason' (1904, 238).

Mosso's investigations awakened the interest of German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, who endorsed a new direction in psychiatry that favoured physiological and biological explanations and relied on experiments. Kraepelin's experiments dealt with measuring reaction time and brain performance under the influence of drugs, memory tests and the recording of all kinds of human movements. In the experiments, he collected reliable data as a basis for further quantification. He posited that the pathology of mental illness, although often caused by brain dysfunctions, had to be observed by studying human movements, thus avoiding the problem that it was impossible to observe the human brain directly. Mosso's experiments were the basis for the correlation of physiological and psychological states that Kraepelin and his assistant William Halse Rivers undertook. Kraepelin and Rivers began to experiment on fatigue and its consequences. They discovered that fatigue was unavoidable and that it protected an organism against exhaustion: 'No doubt, fatigue begins at the same time as the action itself. To avoid the occurrence of fatigue would mean to renounce work itself. Yet, even without any work, we could not avoid getting tired' (Rivers and Kraepelin, 1896, 669). Whatever you are doing or not doing, you will get tired, for it is not work alone that is tiresome, but idleness too. 'For the brain', Kraepelin and Rivers continue,

inaction does not mean complete rest. To be awake and to perform a simple process suffices to evoke the state of inability to perform at all, which can only be cured by sleeping and eating. The pause while working causes, although to a lesser degree than work itself, a slow but progressive reduction in our intellectual performance which cannot be compensated for by simple relaxation. (670)

The first sign of fatigue is, Kraepelin determined, an increasing number of mistakes in the performance of the experimental subject. It is possible to counteract fatigue to a certain degree by resting, eating, drinking and sleeping on the one hand, and by regular training and the effort of will on the other hand. But the signs given by the body should by no means be disregarded. Insofar as it eventually leads to sleep, fatigue is a means for

the body to protect itself against exhaustion. Normally, the body is capable of governing itself, but the self-protection of the working body can be suspended through affective arousal. The effort of will can compensate for fatigue to some extent. Although will can thus make one ignore the signs of fatigue, it is not considered dangerous, since the will remains within the framework of reasonable behaviour; it is passion that drives one's work level over the threshold and leads to exhaustion and self-harm.

Physicians provided different explanations of the psychophysiological processes of fatigue and exhaustion. They saw fatigue as resulting from the consumption of a substance or as a self-intoxication by the products of metabolism. Exhaustion, in turn, was defined as the destruction of the foundations of psychic processes due to excessive consumption or insufficient recreation. Notwithstanding the different explanations given by the scientists, they all agreed about the danger that results from exhaustion. Exhaustion causes a permanent reduction in the ability to work. Psychiatrists warned that increasing fatigue was the first step to the self-destruction of the nervous system through its own activity. Exhaustion causes an increasing number of mistakes and distortions until the self-regulation of the body and mind breaks down. At that moment, control over one's activities is lost. Therefore, the exhausted person is in a dangerous state which psychiatrists compared to mental illnesses, especially to psychosis. The consequences of exhaustion are, in the wording of the psychiatrists, a dissociation of personality, a loss of personality and an abolition of the self; they diagnose 'Erschöpfungsdelirien' (Kraepelin, 1899, 28) as well as 'Erschöpfungsirresein' (Kraepelin, 1920, 55–6), that is, mental delirium or insanity caused by exhaustion.

2

Since the 1960s, exhaustion has been a recurrent theme in Beckett studies (Kenner, 1961, 33–4; 1962, 53–4). Beckett feigns situations with a definite number of elements and exhausts 'by system every possible relation between them' (1961, 34). For example, Watt walks like this:

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit

down. So, standing first on one leg, and then on the other, he moved forward, a headlong tardigrade, in a straight line. The knees, on these occasions, did not bend. They could have, but they did not. No knees could better bend than Watt's, when they chose, there was nothing the matter with Watt's knees, as may appear. But when out walking they did not bend, for some obscure reason. (Beckett, 2009, 23–4)

The originality of this passage is not to be found in the enumeration of possible movements which the stiff leg can perform. As Beckett was well aware, 'exhaustive enumeration' was a strategy already used, for example, in 'vaudeville' (Beckett, 1999, 92). The feedback enumeration exerts on the issue of exhaustion, however, alters the quality of both the movement and its description. Beckett strips the body technique of walking of its self-evidence and describes it like a mechanically executed programme. Although a person is walking, he does not seem to be walking by himself. The movement seems, rather, to be driven by some unknown mechanism that operates on the subject.

Watt's way of walking provokes an analysis which makes explicit what kind of programme or formula is executed in his movements. The walk is exhaustive since it encompasses all directions in space while, nevertheless, moving in a straight line. The gait without bending the knees draws our attention to a technique of the body that seems to be programmed in one way or another. In 1934, in a lecture given at the Société de Psychologie Française and published in the following year, French ethnographer and sociologist Marcel Mauss defined his concept of 'techniques of the body' as follows: 'By this expression I mean the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies' (Mauss, 2006, 78). For Mauss, the idea that the human body is a natural body was not evident to begin with. The historical change in swimming styles and the popularisation of the crawl in Europe disturbed the common understanding of the body as a natural body, behaving in a natural way and performing movements naturally. Techniques of the body such as walking or swimming or making love are not natural at all, although they are difficult to change. There are, for example, only acquired ways of walking, not a single natural one. That is why it is necessary for people to have a pattern for mimesis when they learn to walk. They do not know what they are doing when they are walking; rather, they imitate examples given to them.

Beckett describes a gait without bending the knees. This is not only a gait that is artificial in that it reduces the options for movement but it also reduces the mathematical complexity of the movements. The activity of walking becomes a highly artificial technique of the body which can be described on the level of the programme informing the performance. Its exhaustive description in Beckett epitomises the problematic of the combinatorial: the

leg that cannot bend reduces the infinite possibilities of moving that the healthy can ignore because they subsume them under the successful result to a number of possibilities which, in contrast, can be exhausted.

Watt's way of walking differs from the clichés of how this technique of the body should be performed. According to Henri Bergson, the 'deflection of life toward the mechanical' (Bergson, 1911, 34) or the living body that becomes rigid like a machine produces a comic effect (41–2). Notwithstanding that comic effect, the concept of walking that informs this way of walking, and discovers how the mechanism inside Watt's performance works, is very serious. In 1934, Kurt Goldstein published *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man*. He criticises the standard theory of reflex, which reduces the reflex to a simple mechanical reaction. Instead of reflexology and behaviourism, Goldstein favours a gestalt-theoretical approach to the organism. He describes the performance of any human activity as a figure-ground-formation and argues that 'the reflex phenomenon is not only modified by the state of the rest of the organism, as has been generally accepted, but that the reaction, from the very start, depends on the condition of a field far beyond the reflex arc' (Goldstein, 1995, 176). In the body, every reaction is a gestalt reaction of the whole organism in the form of a figure-ground configuration. Goldstein's most important argument is about human walking and the bending of knees. The gestalt theorists, as is well known, have pointed out that there is an exchange of figure and ground in ambiguous drawings and paintings. Depending on the attitude of the viewer, one or the other part of the configuration becomes the foreground, and accordingly two entirely different figures can arise alternately. This figure-ground relationship explains the appearance of instability as such but not the appearance of directly antagonistic performances, for example in walking. Therefore, Goldstein shows that the exchange between figure and ground can be compared to the alternation of flexor and extension movements. 'Let us assume', he argues,

that at first the stimulus produces a flexion of the ipsilateral leg, because the situation favors this. To this movement there also belongs, under certain circumstances, an extensor movement of the other leg as a functional near effect. This figure, however, is unstable. A reversal takes place; the ground that is formed in the ipsilateral leg, through the extensor, and in the opposite leg through the flexor, now becomes figure. (126)

Walking involves a twofold figure-ground exchange. On the one hand, there is the antagonistic movement of flexor und extensor movements. On the other hand, there is the complete walk as a figure that appears against the ground of the body. Eventually, Goldstein draws a distinction

between adequate performances and drill results. The natural background-figure structure is altered by an artificial shunting off of the drill result of the rest of the organism. Or, more precisely, in drill results, the rest of the organism remains in a constant state, thus representing a uniform background against which the same figure always stands out, while in a normal performance the activity belongs to a state of the whole organism. The good activity is characterised by the fact that in it, the performances are executed in the promptest, most correct manner, and with the best self-assurance. Although there is a great variety of good gestalts, the good gestalt is always given by the internal organisation of the body. The better a personality is centred and integrated, the more definite and stable is the gestalt.

The handicap of the first-person narrator in *Molloy*, who has a stiff leg, only allows for bodily postures that avoid sitting. This situation is not about fatigue and weariness but about exhaustion. Molloy's standard positions are lying down or standing upright, often leaning on a wall, or resting on his bicycle: 'my feet on the ground, my arms on the handle-bars, my head on my arms, and I waited until I felt better' (Beckett, 1994a, 17). When interrogated by the police, his handicap brings disturbances, because he is unable to sit in the common standard position. He was 'told to sit down', but eventually obtained 'permission, if not to lie down on a bench, at least to remain standing, propped against the wall' (23). While Molloy's 'way of resting' seems to be regarded as 'a violation' of 'public order, public decency' (20), people are relishing 'the hour of rest', 'using it to hatch their plans, their heads in their hands' (21). On the one hand, there are positions indicating a pause in daily life which will allow people to recreate and contemplate their situation in order to continue their activities. The position of the head in the hand encodes a harmonious integration of the subject in one and the same social, political, and divine order: 'The boatman rested his elbow on his knee, his head on his hand' (27). On the other hand, there is Molloy's body leaning against the wall, unable to sink down and squat on the ground: 'But for the moment I was content to lean against the wall, my feet far from the wall, on the verge of slipping' (61). These different bodily postures are encoding fatigue and exhaustion. While the tired will move and sit or lie down in order to recreate and, later, continue their activities, the exhausted will freeze in their position, but continue whatever they have been doing.

The consequences of exhaustion are a dissociation or loss of the personality and an abolition of the self. Exhausted subjects are only a mechanically driven bundle of functions. They are in danger of serious damage and present a risk to their environment. The symptoms of exhaustion are not apathy, withdrawal from activity and extinction of movements, but mere

action. The danger for the exhausted lies in that they continue their activity like an overheated machine performing idle motion or a person mindlessly performing repetitive stereotypical movements. While the tired person is able to resume activity in a predictable way, it is uncertain whether and how the exhausted one can ever do so. The exhausted subject will do what is still possible by performing without consideration and personal interest. Pausing or sleeping enables the tired person to take up his or her activity or to continue his or her thoughts because he or she has only suspended or deferred the activity. Therefore, lying down prepares one to fall asleep, which in turn prepares one to resume and continue the activity.

The exhausted subject is beyond any calculus of activity. He or she would do anything to continue an activity rather than stop for recreation. The tired person will rely on his or her habit and perform the body technique in the way it has been learned until the movements will be abandoned at some moment. The exhausted, in contrast, goes on. The tired person, according to Deleuze, 'has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted realizes all of the possible' (Deleuze, 1995, 3). Exhaustion is not just an amplification of tiredness, but a different condition. The tired person wants to continue his or her activity and therefore rests in order to take it up again in the habitual way. The automatism in body techniques guarantees continuation. Whoever performs in a certain way can rely on automatism and is not forced to change the habitual way of movement. The exhausted person will perform an activity even if he or she makes mistakes and loses control, or will perform the activity in an unpredictable way. At any moment, the next movement is the only aim. This performance will override his or her body's capability of self-regulation. The exhausted one cannot rely on the acquired body techniques because the self-regulation of the body has broken down. Therefore, new forms or ways of movement must be invented in order to continue. As Beckett's *Unnamable* puts it: 'That the impossible should be asked of me, good, what else could be asked of me?' (Beckett, 1994b, 340) The automatism in body techniques guarantees continuation. If new forms or ways of movement must be invented in order to continue, then the exhausted one's unpredictable way of movement is not an exceptional movement, but rather a transformation of movement itself.

According to Deleuze, exhaustion is much more than tiredness. In contrast to the preceding medical accounts that emphasise the dangers of exhaustion, he highlights an ambivalence of exhaustion that hovers between the breakdown of the subject and the invention of the unforeseen. The nexus between exhaustion and invention is difficult to grasp, notwithstanding the fundamental difference between saying that people or a situation are exhausted and the exhaustion of literary devices.

3

The ensemble of rhetorical and narrative devices that Beckett uses in order to exhaust narrative fiction comprises series of antitheses, oxymora, paradoxes and contradictions where statements are made, inferences derived, negations of inferences produced, and these negations are, in turn, negated. Enumerations replace propositions, and combinational relations define syntactic relations. The progression of the storyline immediately questions any statement, thus forestalling the emergence of stable meanings. Furthermore, Beckett amputates stories until they fade and extinguish the potential of their development and defer their plot. Episodes, series and the combinatorial replace the storyline, hindering the unfolding of plots, while the possible worlds of fiction are populated by clichés. For example, the title of *Imagination Dead Imagine* prompts us to imagine that imagination itself is dead. It aims at a revocation of the very act of imagination: one has to imagine what imagination is made of (Iser, 1991, 412–25). Imagination, in other words, has to focus on a threshold where imagination is fading. This paradox unfolds in Beckett's prose text, which starts as follows: 'No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine' (Beckett, 2010, 87). There is a three-dimensionality which sometimes evokes a rotunda, sometimes a skull, although tangible spaces are only presented in a mode of vanishing. There are instructions which direct a change of directions, but as soon as they are articulated, they seem to be revoked. Imagination has its origin in a kind of movement that indicates no direction. If an imagination is not articulated in the form of a narrative, not elaborated as fiction, not shaped as story and genre, there is neither storyline nor plot but, rather, a situation of waiting.

Christopher Ricks points out that the topic of motionlessness, fading and dying in Beckett is accompanied by paradoxes in language that stem from the so-called Irish bull (Ricks, 1993, 153–203). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Irish bull as a

self-contradictory proposition; in modern use, an expression containing a manifest contradiction in terms or involving a ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker. Now often with epithet *Irish*; but the word had been long in use before it came to be associated with Irishmen. (Qtd. in Ricks, 1993, 153)

Obviously, the *OED* ignores the energy of the Irish bull that is perceived and used by writers such as Beckett. Ricks explains that the Irish bull is no isolated phenomenon, but rather produces more and more bulls the longer one argues about a bull: 'The Irish Bull is always pregnant' (158).² The Irish bull is not a metaphor: it does not substitute semantic

units or transport a meaning from one discourse to another. Rather, it confronts semantic units that start to oscillate between semantic fields, but cannot be fixed: there is an ongoing virtual movement in the Irish bull that cannot be stopped. Or, to put it in another way: the Irish bull is a rhetorical figure that is at the same time inherently moving and standing still.

Beckett's 'German Letter of 1937' to Axel Kaun provides a model of how exhaustion is operating on the level of the lexicon. Kaun suggested that Beckett might want to translate a selection of Joachim Ringelnatz's poetry into English. Beckett substantiated his refusal with his 'Abscheu vor der Verswut Ringelnatz', that is his 'disgust with Ringelnatz's rhyming fury' (Beckett, 1984, 52; Nixon, 2011, 99). Beckett forges a neologism to express the very situation of German poet Joachim Ringelnatz (Hans Bötticher's pen name). Beckett calls Ringelnatz a 'Reimkuli' (Beckett, 1984, 519). This German neologism combines two nouns. 'Reim', which means 'rhyme' and designates that Ringelnatz has published light verse in order to earn a living, with 'Kuli', which is a homonym and has two different meanings. On the one hand, 'Kuli' is short for *Kugelschreiber* (a ballpoint pen), which is definitely a modern writing utensil. In 1928, the German company Rotring introduced a cheap ballpoint pen that became popular as 'Kuli'. The semantics of this utensil contrasts sharply with *Feder und Tinte*, that is pen and ink. 'Kuli' participates in a code of writing utensils that are definitely not designating classical poetry. Ringelnatz's light verse such as his poem 'Ein männlicher Briefmark erlebte' (Bötticher, 1912, 4), which Beckett alludes to in his letter to Kaun, are subjected to conditions that extend even to the writing utensils. Writing with a ballpoint pen allows for speeding up one's handwriting. That is where the second meaning of 'Kuli', which designates a drudge, a peon or indeed a coolie, an even more derogatory name, comes in. Ringelnatz is subjected to conditions in which a poet has to earn a living by selling his products, as he did by performing his light verse in cabarets and theatres. Obviously, Beckett does not want to restore the conditions of classical poetry written with pen and ink, but rejects the conditions that subject the poet to an accommodation to the literary marketplace where they have to sell their products. The guiding principle of Beckett's neologism can be inferred. It synthesises in an innovative way what can be called the material basis of writing and a critique of the economic condition of poetry in a linguistic molecule that can stand on its own. If a rhyme provides an acoustic resemblance or similarity between two words in order to connect their meanings, Beckett's compound confronts the meaning of the poetic device in a marketplace where poets are treated like drudges or *Kulis/coolies*.

4

Beckett has subtracted whatever was not necessary for the functioning of his plays and media works. Theatre requires neither mimesis nor dialogue to enable the performance of a play. The theatrical illusion does not require scenery, costumes or props. Incidentally, actors are always dressed up whether or not they are wearing clothes. One does not need a curtain to open at the start of the play and close when it is finished. Almost everything that spectators are used to expecting in a theatre can be skipped. Beckett's theatre operates with an extreme – a minimum – that is sufficient to define theatre. In December 1979, David Warrilow performed the premiere of Beckett's *A Piece of Monologue* (Knowlson, 1996, 811). The dispositif of the theatre comprises the stage, the speaker – 'White hair, white nightgown, white socks' (Beckett, 2006, 265) – the lighting and, as properties, a standard oil lamp and a bed. There are no movements that define the action or the performance on stage. The speaker has to stand still. He does not move. Speaking is the only activity that happens on stage. He is speaking about some activities that happened in an undefined place and time. Although 'there is nothing but a voice', it has to be questioned whether the actor on stage is 'delivering a narrative' (West, 2010, 174). *A Piece of Monologue* provokes distinctions between recitation and drama, seeing and hearing, first and third persons (173–9). It is doubtful whether the speaker himself or someone else is performing the action he is reporting. The action takes place only in and through language:

Loose matches in right-hand pocket. Strikes one on his buttock the way his father taught him. Takes off milk white globe and sets it down. Match goes out. Strikes a second as before. Takes off chimney. Smoke-clouded. Holds it in left hand. Match goes out. Strikes a third as before and sets it to wick. Puts back chimney. Match goes out. Puts back globe. Turns wick low. (Beckett, 2006, 266)

Beckett's monologue exhausts the possibilities of speaking about a situation that comprises the lighting of a lamp. The old man is speaking about an action that makes something visible. If one can conceive temporality through movements or through changing lighting conditions, the monologue is situated at the threshold where speaking, movement and action are fading into mere visibility. The nexus between movement and lighting conditions is incorporated in the oil lamp, which signals – in contrast to an electric light – a temporality of its own. The play presents an action that can be seen and heard, but what can be seen and heard is different from the action that is spoken about. The monologue has a temporal structure that is shaped

not so much by progression, but rather by repetitions. One could say that the play triggers the spectator's imagination, who will imagine what is spoken about. The play makes something visible that could not be seen otherwise. The theatre as a particular medium of performance conflates spectatorship and imagination, which begin to be transposed and then lapse. Obviously, one could imagine a play where an actor performs what the man is reporting, but that is beside the point. Due to the medium of theatre, the difference between the situation on stage and the reported situation is oscillating: the visible image and a virtual image that is constituted by the monologue are constantly superimposed on each other. The interplay between the detailed and repetitive description of the lighting and the situation on stage produces a virtual image or a percept that can be disconnected from the play: one imagines or sees something that is not visible on stage, but is at the threshold of visibility.

The exhaustion of a situation can proceed through the combinatorial and lay bare the dispositif that is inherent in a particular medium. The principal difficulty, however, will always be how to conceive the nexus between the exhausted subject and the exhaustion of the situation defined by a particular. Although Beckett has raised this issue concerning different media, Deleuze concludes his essay with Beckett's 'Comment dire' as an example for the exhaustion of language as a particular medium (Deleuze, 1998, 173–4).

Stirrings Still is Beckett's penultimate text, and 'Comment dire' is his ultimate one; 'The phrase "comment dire" occurs in the first sentence of the first draft of *Stirrings Still*: "Tout ~~tout les temps~~ ^{Toujours} à la même distance comme c'est comment dire?"' (Van Hulle, 2011, 18). Beckett himself translated 'Comment dire' as 'what is the word':

Comment dire has the formal aspect of a poem, but it can also be read as a failed or deliberately aborted attempt to write one single sentence, a succession of variants, constantly interrupted by the words 'what is the word' whenever the author arrives at a dead end in the composition process. (18)

Dirk Van Hulle has reconstructed a completed form of the virtual sentence which would read as follows:

'folie vu tout ce ceci-ci que de vouloir croire entrevoir loin là là-bas à peine'
– in Beckett's own translation: 'folly seeing all this this here for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there' – and then the attempt at finishing the sentence is abandoned. The vague spatial orientation 'loin là là-bas' contrasts sharply with the here and now of the premature ending, marked by an explicit notation of the date ('29.10.88'). (Van Hulle, 2011, 18)

Ruby Cohn gave an account of the genesis:

In July [1988] a dizzy Beckett fell in his kitchen, where he was discovered unconscious by Suzanne. Hospitalized for tests, he was thought to have had a stroke. He watched himself slowly regain speech and mobility, and by September he committed the process to a poem in French – ‘Comment dire’. [...] ‘Comment dire’ was started in the hospital, and it was completed in the rest home where Beckett spent the last year of his life. (Cohn, 2005, 382)

The text is, according to Cohn, Beckett’s attempt ‘to render the particularity of overcoming verbal paralysis, and the generality of articulating the moral situation, which many recognized as their own’ (383).

The title ‘Comment dire’ designates a turn of phrase which is used when, in a given situation, a speaker has the common, appropriate expression on the tip of his or her tongue. The disorder called motor aphasia could be defined as the disability to organise the muscular movements for producing the sounds of speech. The everyday situation where one has an expression on the tip of one’s tongue and the motor aphasia share a phenomenon – one is unable to articulate an expression which is, virtually, known by the speaker. ‘Comment dire’ combines the expression with further hints which indicate that she or he is unable to find the right expression in a given situation. The verbal expression starts a deixis which is without content in that it is directed at the very act of aiming at something. Demonstrative pronouns take the place of the missing expression, indicating that not any object but a determined object has to be designated. There are ongoing attempts to point at the missing expression but without any success. Deixis is a linguistic device with which a subject can define its space and time. Expressions such as ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘there’ or ‘yesterday’ are related both to the speaking person and to the complete statement of which he or she is a part. Obviously, the subject who appropriates the linguistic signs has not been developed to its full.

‘Comment dire’ seems to reverse the linguistic theory of the subject who uses shifters as means to appropriate language. There is a subject inherent in the text in so far as the speaker is unable to appropriate language by using deixis. There is no subject indicated in the text, either by pronouns or by pointing. However, this description does not succeed in grasping the relation between the text and its concept of subjectivity. The situation that the speaker has a defined object before his eyes, but is unable to articulate what it is, is indicated not by the subject but by pointing at something, which is exactly what deixis means. The speaker is visualising something mentally but is unable to say what it is. She or he is pointing linguistically at the situation. The statements are delivered in the field of optical vision as, for example, the participle ‘vu’ in line 10 or the verb ‘voire’ in line 24 (Beckett, 2002, 112). The attempt to render more precisely what is seen leads to a challenge of the very act of seeing: ‘vouloir croire entrevoir’ (112). What is visualised mentally is no optical apparition at all. The speaker

is moving towards further statements by using tropes such as parallelism and assonances. One word is marked in the syntactical formation: *folly*. The speaker who is trying to deliver a statement is excluded from the use of language everybody seems to participate in. *Folly* as well as being mad still has its best definition as not being able to participate in a standard system of reference. Although the speaker fails to refer to a common system of reference given with the language, he or she is still able to designate his or her failure as *folly* due to the resemblances of the phenomena.

The speaker's originality lies in the effort to find alternatives to the missing expression even if it is an exhausting and fruitless effort. After all, the speaker is articulating something, though not referring to the missing expression. She or he substitutes the linguistic function of designation and reference with a pure movement that is performed by the act of articulating. As long as deixis is possible, it is much more than articulation: if the speaker successfully refers to something, the articulation threatens to stop. The extinction of the act of speaking is made visible when the poem's text has two lines of blanks followed by a last 'Comment dire'. The white sheet of paper that the text is printed on no longer functions as the background which allows for reading, but, rather, the blanks are referring both to the object that cannot be designated by the speaker and to the failure of designation. The attempts to point at the very object are incorporated in themselves because they are delivering an empty expression. The articulation which continues although it has failed becomes an unforeseen possibility of saying precisely what has to be said.

5

For Deleuze, there is neither a stable notion of media nor a concept of media that focuses exclusively on technical aspects of a medium. He seems to be aware that even the technological basis of a medium is constantly evolving and changing. There is no single entity or apparatus that constitutes 'film' or 'radio'; there are no essential technological features that define these media. Rather, there exist a multitude of films or radios. The medium is a heterogeneous domain on the levels of its apparatus, of its practice, and its forms. Therefore, a medium is not defined by its technical components but extends to techniques of the body and, more broadly, to cultural techniques.

Deleuze deals with the modes of perception and the techniques of the body in order to find out what a medium does rather than how it could be defined. He has elaborated a type of virtual image as percept, that is a perception that is extracted from a situation, but not already given in the

very same situation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 163–99). The notion of the percept is not limited to a particular medium but may cross the boundaries of, say, optical media such as painting, theatre, film. Although a percept is constituted in a specific medium, it can separate from its original context. If Beckett gives us representations of the exhausted subject, it is difficult to grasp the role and function of the medium in the making of the percept. In his argument, Deleuze skips the issue of media and deals directly with the percept.

One could not make a percept, however, by using the medium simply as a device for representation. From Deleuze's point of view, the medium is negligible because it neither produces the percept nor represents it. Actually, for Deleuze, the medium hinders the making of a percept because it allows the clichés to circulate. For media studies, however, the main question is how Beckett renders present a percept by exhausting the possibilities that are inherent in a medium. Beckett uses the medium of, say, the theatre in a new way by stripping it down to its inherent dispositif. According to Deleuze, the plays make visible a percept, but it will come only to the fore by exhausting the possibilities of the medium, by reducing it to its dispositif. Under the extremity of the conditions of the dispositif, one could realise a new possibility in and with the medium. Nevertheless, the dispositif does not guarantee the making of a percept. It is not enough to present the basics of a medium in order to produce a percept. It is as if a percept was in search of a subject who can incorporate and bear it.

Notes

- 1 For this chapter, I am partly reusing the argument I developed in my article 'The audiovisual field in Bruce Nauman's Videos', *Osiris* 28 (2013), pp. 146–61. This concerns my reconstruction of the history of research into fatigue as well as parts of my reading of Deleuze's work on the matter. A slightly different German version of the argument can be found in my 'Erschöpfte Literatur, Über das Neue bei Samuel Beckett', in Armin Schäfer and Karin Kröger (eds), *Null, Nichts und Negation. Beckett's Beckett's No-Thing*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2016, pp. 225–45.
- 2 This statement quoted by Ricks is 'Sir John Pentland Mahaffy's famous reply when asked to distinguish the Irish bull from similar freaks of language' (2001, 158).

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