

Article

Stranger Things, Plant Life, and Posthuman Endgames: Reading Beckett with Others

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Abstract: This essay reads work by Samuel Beckett, especially his prose, with a focus on vegetal ontology and plant life, soil, mud, and dirt. By juxtaposing Beckett with recent fiction, e.g., the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, contemporary plant theory, and the general ecology of Erich Hörl, posthuman entanglements and relations are discussed as part of an ontological infrastructure in the texts, which can also be linked to Beckett's interest in prosthetics and technical media. It is suggested that an approach of this kind might offer new perspectives on the dispersed subjectivity in Beckett's texts.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; posthuman; ecology; vegetal; plants; media; *Stranger Things*

1. Vegetal Ontology

Five years ago, a summer when 7000 wildfires haunted California, the soon-to-be-successful American Netflix series *Stranger Things* premiered.¹ Mixing horror and the literary fantastic with a nostalgia-drenched pastiche of early 1980s youth culture—not least through the soundtrack, with songs by Echo and the Bunnymen, Clash, Joy Division, and others—the series' composers, the Duffer brothers, managed to enthral a big audience. Apart from default motifs, such as adolescent boy bonding versus teenage sex, small town characters and class differences, beer drinking and bullying, the story uses some interesting ingredients to spice the composition. In the woods outside of the town of Hawkins, a US government-run facility shaped by the military-industrial complex of the Cold War period is housed, and the shady experiments undertaken there are to have unpredictable and scary consequences for everyday life, the environment, and the whole nature–culture setting of the area.

The plot of *Stranger Things* has since developed over three consecutive seasons (a fourth is announced for 2022). Moreover, the series' mix of small-town drama, eighties ethnography, surveillance culture, and horror, as well as the evocative transgressions of natural and artificial, life and death, human and more-than-human, have gained significance in sync with the increasing impact and awareness of the environmental and climate crisis.

In an essay called “The Pleasures and Horrors of Plants Today”, Nathalie Meeker and Antónia Szabari discuss the series in terms of a vegetal ontology, epitomized in its plant monsters, the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer (Meeker and Szabari 2018). In this, they partake in an important strand in contemporary art and critical thinking focusing on the entanglements of humans and plants. Apart from the “radical botany” of Meeker and Szabari, one can mention, in this context, fiction by Jeff Vandermeer and others, as well as theoretical work by, for instance, Michael Marder (Marder 2013), Emanuele Coccia (Coccia [2017] 2019), and Jeffrey Nealon (Nealon 2015) who, in his book, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*, underlines how an approach of this kind is crucial in “today’s posthuman, ecocentric, climate-threatened, locavore world” and how the contemporary analysis of biopolitics must reconsider the notion of life “beyond the narrow confines of the human” (Nealon 2015, p. xiv).

Such endeavors, of course, also take into account the technological aspects of life on the planet today. This is emphasized in *Stranger Things* in the radical network that



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interweaves the laboratory—its computers, control panels, electronic head devices, and other equipment—with the vegetal underworld that is exposed, and which is literally invading the lab through a portal. The story visualizes and elaborates on a mixing of ontologies.

But plants themselves prefigure such a mix of different categories and spheres through their photosynthetic operations. As Emanuele Coccia reminds us of in his book, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, “Instead of revealing itself as a space of competition or mutual exclusion, the world opens in them [*in plants*] as the metaphysical space of the most radical form of mixture, the form that makes possible the coexistence of the incompatible, an alchemical laboratory in which everything seems to be able to change its nature, to pass from the organic to the inorganic” (Coccia [2017] 2019, p. 48). If this “alchemical laboratory” has always been part of the naturalized background and biochemical infrastructure of life on the planet, the climate crisis has dragged it into the light.

The heterogeneous composition in *Stranger Things* can be read through the lens of what German media philosopher Erich Hörl has recently designated as *general ecology*, a critical and “deterritorialized” concept that complicates anthropocentrism, takes into account current techno-ecologies, and caters to the “post-humanist present” (Hörl 2017, p. 3). It is an expansion and vitalization of “ecology” in sync with thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton. This “ecologization” of thinking and being is entwined with a process of “cyberneticization”, which has not only engendered onto-epistemological changes—in and between animals, machines, and others—but also an “environmental culture of control”, as Hörl writes, manifested today in data mining, algorithms, sensor networks, and an “explosion of environmental agency” (Hörl 2017, pp. 4–10).

In the Netflix series, this process is evoked and dramatized by the techno-ecological setting and by the indexing of Cold War science and secrecy, and the covert research into nuclear technology and biochemicals, which has affected the planet thoroughly and contributed to “the Great Acceleration”.

But such theorizations and dramatizations have themselves historical trajectories, which lead to the cybernetic ecologies of the 1960s and 1970s explored by Gregory Bateson, James Lovelock, and, Lynn Margulis, who early on criticized the “species-specific arrogance” of humans, while at the same time reminding us of our close connection with plants—“Our tenacious illusion of special dispensation belies our true status as upright mammalian weeds”, as she writes in *Symbiotic Planet* (Margulis 1998, p. 119). And they lead to a strand in postwar fiction, characterized by works such as John Wyndham’s post-apocalyptic vegetal novel, *The Day of the Triffids* (Wyndham [1954] 2008), Brian Aldiss’ lush *Hothouse* (Aldiss [1962] 2008), which offers a less anthropocentric view of a planet dominated by plants, and the aesthetically and formally more complex works, in this vein, by J. G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, and others.

In the following, I will approach Samuel Beckett as one of those other writers. His work has usually, for good reasons, been incorporated into a certain modernist lineage. At the same time, it points to the future (cf. Rabaté 2016, p. 2) and displays features which connect it to the vegetal fiction outlined above. This makes it pervious to an analysis informed by the recent theorizing around ecologies and plants. At least, this is the proposal put forth here.

I will, specifically, trace two elemental figures or processes—*geotropism* and *heliotropism*—which can be related to a vegetal ontology in Beckett’s work, primarily his prose, and discuss these texts in relation to a more-than-human terrain—a tendency that has become more common in Beckett scholarship in recent years (see next section). Such an orientation might be able to reconsider the experiential, intellectual, and physical shortcomings of the characters and narrators in Beckett’s work and, even if only outlined here, invite a re-reading of the subjectivities, agencies, and materialities written forth in his texts.

Moreover, I will, tentatively, propose that this strand in the work can be connected to the prosthetics operative in Beckett’s writing from early on (cf. Tajiri 2007), which plays an important role in his inventive plays from the 1960s and 1970s. This points to a convergence

between what Rosi Braidotti has discussed as two modes of the posthuman—“becoming earth” and “becoming machine” (Braidotti 2013, pp. 81–95)—and it opens the possibility of further re-contextualizing the work as not only exploring the material and metaphysical conditions of human existence, but also, specifically, the transformation of these within a setting of postwar techno-capitalism and its hydra-like control society.

Thus, I want to suggest, finally, that Beckett’s work can be investigated in relation to Hörl’s theory of ecologization, as both a symptom of the culture of control that has emerged during the last century, and as a critical intervention that reconsiders relationality and environmentality through a “non-affirmative affirmation” (Hörl 2017, p. 5)—a paradoxical operation that seems appropriate for the paradoxical and spectral being written forth in Beckett’s texts, marked by “self-present effacement”, as Jonathan Boulter writes in his study of the posthuman in Beckett (Boulter 2019, p. 11). Certainly, such a perspective needs to be more fully developed. It is here suggested, primarily, as an incentive for further thought.

2. Downward with Beckett

“[T]he epilogue to subjectivity” (Adorno 2019, p. 253). Those were the words that Theodor W. Adorno used in describing Samuel Beckett’s famous play *Endgame* (1957), a drama about the crippled duo Hamm and Clov, interlocked in struggle and locked into a room with a view of something close to *nothing*—here as elsewhere in Beckett’s work depicted as quite attractive. As Clov aptly retorts at one point in the drama, “Better than nothing! Is it possible?” (Beckett 2006a, p. 135). Adorno developed this description and his argument by suggesting that Beckett’s apocalyptic play takes place in a “neutral” zone “between” the inner and outer realms, in a state of “complete alienation”; and he underlines, astutely, how “*Endgame* assumes that the individual’s claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility” (Adorno 2019, pp. 244–46).

Such an assumption could be used as a guiding light when looking back on much of Beckett’s work from the early 1930s until his death in 1989. That his plays, poetry, and prose address the shortcomings of Man and individuality at the twilight of modernity is something a reader soon discovers. They perform a kind of Cartesian comedy, in which the cogito and the experiencing subject, its agency and identity, are disassembled and reconceived in more or less strange compositions. Crucial in these operations is the focus on mortality and finitude, on the inescapable but elusive end—of the individual, even of humanity, as such. Almost. As Clov observes in the very first lines of the play: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished”.

Thus, one might say that what is at stake is a series of endgames that explore the limits of the human, but also our entanglement with other beings on the planet. While the former has been a recurrent feature in the readings of Beckett, the latter has not been as frequently discussed, until recently. During the last decade, several studies have appeared that explicitly address the more-than-human and posthuman elements in the work (e.g., Effinger 2011; Schwab 2012; Boxall 2015; Rabaté 2016; Moody 2017). While Rabaté offers a fine discussion of how the idea of the “posthuman” entered Beckett’s work, and the literary and philosophical context of this (Rabaté 2016, pp. 37–48), the most important text for me, here, has been Jonathan Boulter’s analyses of Beckett’s short prose, where he investigates the posthuman as something that emerges “in specific relation to space, material or imagined” (Boulter 2019, p. 14). Initially, Boulter approaches this figure via N. Katherine Hayles’ notion of the posthuman and Donna Haraway’s analysis of the cyborg, as well as Derrida’s hauntology and Blanchot’s “subjectivity without any subject”, but eventually explores it, more thoroughly, through Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* and, crucially, its relation to space and to “world” (Boulter 2019, pp. 15–33). It is a sharp analysis that I will come back to.

My own discussion will, mainly, focus on the vegetal—which has not been singled out as a theme in previous discussions, as far as I am aware of—and on a mixing of ontologies. As the title of this article suggests, I will take a closer look at an “endgame” that brings the human into contact with plants, soil, and dust; two “closely related” kingdoms, to

quote Margulis ([Margulis 1998](#), p. 88). Even if an ecologically oriented reading of Beckett—“ecological” in a more traditional sense—might come forth as unexpected, it is worth mentioning that he was, early on, a reader of Ernst Haeckel, the inventor of the concept of ecology ([Ackerley and Gontarsky 2004](#), p. 242). Moreover, a kind of wicked pastoral is operative in his writings from the start (cf. [Rabaté 2016](#), p. 9), and this includes the vegetal sphere and plant life.²

The latter is, however, topologically speaking, preceded by a vertical movement, a descent toward the terrestrial that can be perceived on several occasions already in Beckett’s first published prose work, the collection of stories, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934).³ The protagonist in these pieces is Belacqua, named after the indolent lute maker in Purgatorio, Beckett’s favorite character in Dante’s comedy and depicted as sitting with his knees pressed by his arms to the chest. Even though Beckett’s Belacqua is prone to nomadic rambling, he opposes bodily labor and prefers pauses. These character traits would also affect the composition of the Belacqua repose and turn it into something like a fetal position on the ground, in hiding from weather, wind, and the world. In *Murphy* (1938), Beckett’s first published novel, the main character, accordingly, dreams of an “embryonal repose” that he calls his “Belacqua phantasy”, and which forces him to lie down “on any old clod” and “enter the landscapes” ([Beckett 1957](#), pp. 78–79).

Such an attraction to the earthly, such *geotropism*, would be further explored in the coming decades. In one of the first stories that Beckett wrote in French, right after World War II, “The Calmative” (1946), one encounters an outright declaration of this downward movement as central for the subject in progress—“I had merely to bow my head and look down at my feet, for it is in this attitude I always drew the strength to, how shall I say, I don’t know, and it was always from the earth, rather than from the sky, notwithstanding its reputation, that my help came in time of trouble” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 265). In another story from the same year, “The End”, the narrator longs for a secluded space and retreats firstly into a cave—another geo-trope, with obvious historical and philosophical resonance—then moves into a wooden shed, where he is transformed into worm, a form of becoming that Beckett will investigate further in future works. As a worm wriggling by the roadside, the narrator finds shelter and ataractic stillness beneath a punt turned upside down on land. He lies there, listening to the toads and rats in his proximity. A kind of symbiosis with the surroundings seems to be at work. Almost. This nearness and mixing with other materialities and beings are comically prefigured by the narrator’s previous experience of becoming one with his cherished wooden stool, which even had a hole for his cyst: “At times I felt its wooden life would invade me, till I myself became a piece of wood” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 276).

The story concludes with a vision of a loftier and seemingly more sublime symbiosis, where the individual and the environment appear to fuse in the moment of death. But the final lines are ambiguous: “The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 293). As often, redemption is postponed. Slight transformation, perhaps, but no resolution. Boulter, in his reading of the story, sees in this final passage a depiction of a space “where posthuman being may emerge”—where “being fades but it never disappears”, as he writes ([Boulter 2019](#), p. 65). In the end, in writing and life, the endings just go on.

Similar endgames, intruding onto life beyond the human, are played out in more pronounced modes of “becoming earth” ([Braidotti 2013](#)) in the trilogy of novels that Beckett published in the early 1950s, but also in his collection of *Texts for nothing* (1955), in which the narrative I is placed in a muddy mold or dusty crevice from where his stories are told. The position is marked out early in the book: “Quag, heath up the knees, faint sheep-tracks, troughs scooped deep by the rains. It was far down in one of these I was lying, out of the wind” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 295). A little later, the position is further depicted: “I am down in the hole the centuries have dug, centuries of filthy water, flat on my face on

the dark earth sodden with the creeping saffron waters it slowly drinks” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 296). The subject is thus opened up to *other* spaces and times, and the physical connection between different material layers and bodies is further stressed: “I’m up there and I’m down here, under my gaze, foundered, eyes closed, ear cupped against the sucking peat [. . .]” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 297).

In the trilogy, this connection is evoked in explicitly vegetal terms. Even though Molloy’s geological desire (*Molloy*, 1951) is better known—not least through the stones that he carries in his jacket and trousers, and which he sucks in an orderly and permutational fashion—he also repeatedly declares a longing for the terrestrial and vegetal and describes how he is “filled with roots and tame stems” ([Beckett 1959](#), p. 49). The theme is entwined with the novel’s recurrent scatology, for instance in the inversion of oral and anal cavities, which suggests how the human body, rather than being atomic and autonomous, is connected with, immersed into, and part of a heterogeneous materiality and ecology. Such an observation of relationality as something crucial must be confronted with the more common one that Beckett writes about regarding isolation and loneliness, which is true, but also dependent on the fabricate and design of the measuring stick (e.g., human/posthuman).

The focus on loneliness is supported in the title of the second novel in the trilogy, *Malone Dies* (1951). Malone is isolated in his dying, it seems. But he is far from an autonomous individual facing his fate. Rather, he emerges as a “succession of local phenomena”, as the text claims ([Beckett 1959](#), p. 235). Moreover, he needs a stick (and other technical media) to be able to act. Still, the vegetal and geotropical is not as prominent here. It will be more pronounced in *The Unnamable* (1953), as well as in Beckett’s last novel, *How It Is* (1961). In the former, we encounter an elusive narrator and subjectivity. Initially lacking a name and a body, it is more of a fluid experience, spread out. But it will soon take on different vice-existents, as Beckett calls them ([Beckett 1959](#), p. 317), such as Mahood, who lives in a jar, like a plant, and Worm, an amoeba-like creature and elemental form of life, sometimes compared to the monad of Leibniz. Worm also prefigures the larval being that tells the story in *How It Is*, a being that lives in the mud in a primary state where vegetal and animal are mixed and is engaged in, or rather is the object of, a metamorphosis, perhaps an ontogenesis, which is ultimately aborted, it seems.

Lawrence Harvey observed already in the 1970s how life in Beckett “is rendered inanimate or scaled down from the human or animal to the vegetable level” (quoted in [Perloff 1996](#), p. 116). The list of examples above gives some idea of how this takes place in his early work. They underline the physical contact and interchange between the human/animal and the vegetal. The narrator in these stories—body, senses, emotions, thought—meet and mix with dirt, dust, and plants. Moreover, the process is charged by sexuality, mythology, and dark humor. In *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, geotropism asserts itself in an allusion to the myth of how the hanged man’s sperm gives birth to the plant called mandrake ([Beckett 2006a](#), p. 11); and in the prose piece “Enough” (1966), we find one of Beckett’s funniest, richest, and most resonant vegetal stories (if one might call them so) told by an old woman looking back on her youth, which she spent with a strange man “ejaculating” words on the ground, incessantly bent like a bow toward the earth, even caressing the soil with his face, eating the flowers on his way. In the story, vegetal and human are fused. Almost. As the narrator exclaims: “What do I know of man’s destiny? I could tell you more about radishes” ([Beckett 2006b](#), p. 370).

The geotropism and the descriptions of the vegetal tend to bring forth a state of, if not symbiosis, at least immersion. Ackerley and Gontarsky have described the subjects in Beckett’s 1950s novels as a “nervous system that cannot finally differentiate the internal from the external” ([Ackerley and Gontarsky 2004](#), p. 597). Far from being an individual, the subject is dispersed and distributed, sharing its circumstances with other entities and processes, which makes it pertinent to actualize here Hayles’ notion of the posthuman, with its distributed cognition and agency ([Hayles 1999](#); cf. [Boulter 2019](#), pp. 87–88). And even if loneliness, isolation, and vulnerability are evoked, this does not contradict the presence and importance of distribution, immersion, and ecological relationality. One might compare

this construction of elemental human subjectivity with Coccia's characterization of the plant as both "complete exposure [. . .] and communion", and "as the most intense, radical, and paradigmatic form of being in the world" (Coccia [2017] 2019, p. 5). Even though such wording does not seem to harmonize perfectly with Beckett, immersion and exposure are crucial to the kind of being written forth in his works.

Which brings us back to the vegetal ontology and the streaks of posthumanism in *Stranger Things*. While the plant monsters in the TV series connect this world with the nether world, opening earthy and root-filled passages between different realms, the diffuse human-vegetal beings in Beckett's prose seem to straddle divides between both internal and external, presence and absence, as well as life and death—a "spectrality" that is scrupulously analyzed by Boulter. Similarly, it is possible to make connections between this hybrid entity and the weird ecologies in novels such as Aldiss' *Hothouse* (Aldiss [1962] 2008), in which, for instance, plants have developed anthropomorphic sense organs. It goes without saying that Beckett's prose and thinking carry an aesthetic complexity and an intensity of a different kind. Still, the convergences are intriguing and invite further investigation.

3. Light, Air

If the so far discussed instances of geotropism in Beckett's texts are rendered comical or tragicomical—more than often cloaked in a parodic mode—the relation to plant life changes somewhat in mood in the prose works that he composes during the latter part of his life. The focus also shifts, slightly, to a more serene stillness and resilience, to another aspect of the vegetal; approaching, more significantly, the kind of "exposure" that Coccia writes about. For one thing, the downward movement is counterpoised by an ascension toward the celestial as a source of energy—by *heliotropism*, that is. In "Still" (1974), for instance, the story begins with the sunlight hitting the story's I, and even if evening is imminent, the narrator adjusts his body to the subsiding light in a series of discrete movements: "[. . .] normally turn head now and see it the sun low in the southwest sinking", "[. . .] and go stand by western window", "Normally turn head now ninety degrees to watch sun which if already gone then fading afterglow", as if becoming a flower himself, something which is also evoked by other passages in the piece (Beckett 2006b, p. 415). And as the title emphasizes, stillness is the longed-for plant-like condition never to be attained by the elusive narrating agency in the story, described by Boulter as "Being without subject" (Boulter 2019, p. 145).

Plants, and flowers especially, have an important position in the descriptive and figural lexicon that Beckett develops and deploys in late texts, both in circumscribing the present and in recalling a past. In a sentimental story such as "Heard in the Dark 2" (1979), the flower, as a symbol of both love and finitude, is operative—"The years have flown and there at the same place as then you sit in the bloom of adulthood bathed in rainbow light gazing before you" (Beckett 1995a, p. 141). In another endgame, "For To End Yet Again" (1975), the figurative use blends with the descriptive in approaching a mode of being that reminds us of the soil-and-dirt existence in the novels. While the story starts with a lonely "sepulchral" (Boulter 2019, p. 149) skull in the dark, a grey light comes lingering and creates a plant-like subject, "Same grey all that little body from head to feet sunk ankle deep were it not for the eyes last bright of all" (Beckett 2006b, p. 418), unclear whether it will be able to reach an end.

A special place in this group is held by a piece called "The Image", not published until the year before Beckett's death, but written already in 1956 and part of the work-in-progress that would result in *How It Is*. The text opens with a tongue stuck into the mud, soon accompanied by body parts—arms, hands, trunk, legs—swimming in the dirt (Beckett 1995b). This situation generates a memory, an image bathing in springtime impressions—blue sky, light, flowers, and colors—while also introducing a technical system of animal beings—a young man, a young woman, a dog, all literally interconnected through hands and leash—before the story ends with tongue, once again, in the mud. The piece is just

one single sentence spoken-written: a verbal–vegetal machine of mud and mouth, soil and language, nature and culture that brings something to life. The movement between geotropism and heliotropism in the text generates, if not a world, at least a memory and an image, which chimes, slightly, with Beckett’s own early readings of the vegetal in Proust (see note 2).

The vegetal in these later prose pieces is, thus, somewhat different than in the works from the 1940s and 1950s discussed above. And rather than inviting tragicomedy, they produce a more serene, melancholic atmosphere where elements of air, earth, and fire play a central role. These function here—and before, I should add—as what [Ackerley and Gontarsky \(2004\)](#), p. 597) call “intermediaries” that organize the relations between the distributed subject and the environment (both in space and time). They can be compared to what media theorist John Durham Peters analyzes in terms of *elemental* media, which carry “ecological, ethical, and existential import”, and are parts of an ontological infrastructure that form and inform being ([Peters 2015](#), p. 15). Coccia, quite naturally, brings up plants as crucial in the constitution of such an ontological infrastructure. “Plants are the real mediators”, he claims, “they are the first eyes that appeared and opened themselves onto the world” ([Coccia \[2017\] 2019](#), p. 21). Such rhetoric gravitates toward the hyperbolic, but the proposal has a grain of truth to it, and it underlines the onto-epistemological role of plant life in this context.

In 2008, the French artist Claire Morel created a supplement to Beckett’s story “The Image”. In a gesture culled from avant-garde practice, she confiscated and erased the words of Beckett’s text, while at the same time adding punctuation that was not there initially. As Annette Gilbert writes in a comment on Morel, the embodied rhythm, the breathing in Beckett’s piece is thus laid bare ([Gilbert 2014](#); see also [Moody \(2017\)](#) on rhythm in relation to the posthuman in Beckett’s short prose text *Ping*). Morel’s reading is not only appropriative but also appropriate, firstly, by exposing the materiality of writing and media as central to Beckett’s poetics and, secondly, by bringing up *breathing* as an element in his aesthetic ecology—present as such already in the earliest works, for instance, in Murphy’s struggle with this basic condition of life, or in the prose works from the 1950s, where it is interwoven with the babbling of the narrators.

But, perhaps, breath is even more accentuated and differentiated in later works. Exemplary is, of course, the minimalist play *Breath* (1966), consisting of no more than two cries surrounding a breath, and orchestrated by different degrees of light and darkness ([Beckett 2006a](#), pp. 399–401). But the external, even technical regulation and control of the oral cavity and its expressions and, by extension, the passage of air that enlivens the body and links it with the surrounding space returns in other works and settings—in the role “Opener” that verbally controls “Voice” in *Cascando* (1963), or in the beam of light turning on and off voices and words in *Play* (1963). It is here a binary machine, a kind of cybernetic control mechanism that Beckett would develop further in scripts and scores, for example, in the flowchart-like text for *Film* (1963). Similarly, the flow of words and air are threatened or stopped by the presence of a gag in the plays staging interrogation scenes, which evoke political violence and the surveillance culture of the Cold War (the connotations of which are amplified by Beckett’s inventive use of technical media, such as microphones, tape recorders, and cameras), for instance in *Rough for Radio II* (written in the early sixties) and *Catastrophe* (1982), dedicated to the imprisoned Václav Havel. But breath can also become a compositional element in the stage directions, such as in *That Time* (1974–1975).

Breath as a grounding condition of life brings up, once again, the vegetal in Beckett’s endgames and explorations of life beyond the human. As Coccia reminds us of, “Plants have transformed the world into the reality of breath” ([Coccia \[2017\] 2019](#), p. 11). But as the above examples indicate, breathing is not only a bio- and physiological basis for existence. As is shown in Beckett’s work (with the darkest of humor in Murphy’s search for a respirator to support his passivity), and as we are becoming more and more aware of today, even breath is subjected to bio- and necro-politics and entangled with the technical infrastructures and machineries at work in the world. We are reminded of this when

encountering the uneven distribution and treatment of the pandemic and through the European immigration policy that leads to the drowning of thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean each year, as well as to the suffocation of men and women in the trucks of migrant smugglers. At a fundamental level, the existential charge of breath is also evoked by the climate crisis and its elemental upheavals—fire, floods, and air saturated by carbon dioxide (to an extent that not even plants can handle).

By juxtapositions such as this, I do not intend to draw any spectacular conclusions, only to remind readers that Beckett's work is, in many ways, contemporaneous and entangled with the emergence of a (post)modern control society and a concurrent process of cybernetization ([Hörl 2017](#)) during the last century, which was intensified with the techno-capitalism and “great acceleration” of the postwar period. The question is, how can this pave the way for productive and pertinent recontextualizations of his work—and how might it generate new readings?

4. Quaqua (Coda)

In 2012, American writer Ben Marcus published his novel *The Flame Alphabet* ([Marcus 2012](#)). It tells the strange story of an equally strange pandemic in which the language and voices of children become toxic, contaminate, and eventually kill adults who are exposed to these sonic circumstances. The narrator of the story is called Sam (or Samuel). He becomes acquainted with a man called Murphy (also the name, of course, of Beckett's first published novel), who soon evolves into a central character in the plot and in relation to the *Leitmotif* of the pandemic. Moreover, Murphy is the inventor of a weird piece of technology, a pulsating organic–artificial machine called “The Listener” that Sam and his wife Claire employ on their visits in a nearby forest; there might be a link here to Murphy's reflections on a respirator in Beckett's novel. Out in the forest, they connect the machine to the ground via orange-colored cables and can, accordingly, receive, after some search through a noisy channel, the voices and sermons of their favorite rabbis (Jewishness and exile are, incidentally, other topics in the novel).

In many ways, Marcus' novel comes forth as a reading of Beckett in fictional form. A sharp and resonant reading, I would add. In its exploration of how humans are entangled with so-called nature and the vegetal as well as with (media) technologies, in order to give meaning to existence and to uphold life—but also in its ambiguous representation of language as lethal as well as inescapable—it manages to juxtapose and shed light on the relation between several important issues in Beckett's writings, such as plants and prosthetic technologies.

Fredric Jameson once claimed that maiming is both a motif and a formal operation in Beckett ([Jameson 2002](#), p. 206), and this is conversely developed through the presence of prostheses in his texts, as shown in Yoshiki Tajiri's study of the “Prosthetic Body” ([Tajiri 2007](#)). These things are well known—through Molloy's bike and crutch, Malone's stick, the jar that supports one narrator in *The Unnamable*, Krapp's tape recorder that brings memories to life and to death, and so on. Such technical artifacts seem to be integral to human existence. Nature and culture are inescapably interconnected.

The distributed subject—immersed in soil, entangled with plants—that has been discussed above, can be juxtaposed with the subject dependent on various prostheses in its acts and perceptions, feelings and thoughts. As previously asserted, the two modes of the posthuman outlined by [Braidotti \(2013\)](#)—“becoming earth” and “becoming machine”—operate in concurrence in Beckett's writings. They are present from the early work and onward, but I would say that the relation between them becomes more urgent in the experimental plays, when recorded sound, film, and other technologies are employed in the staging of experience and existential infrastructures, as suggested in the discussion on breath, above. Another example might be the entanglement of man and machine in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), already in the 1990s discussed by Hayles in terms of the posthuman ([Hayles 1999](#), p. 94). “Very near-sighted”, “Hard of hearing”, and with a “Cracked voice” ([Beckett 2006a](#), p. 221), technology seems to be an asset for Krapp's acting, but he is also

regularly compared to animals, and he lives, accordingly, in a “den” (Beckett 2006a, p. 221), that is in a burrow, underground, which reminds us of the geotropism encountered above.

And it reminds us of the weird organic–artificial machinery at work in Marcus’ novel, which in its turn brings up associations with related inventions in work by William S. Burroughs or, let us say, the films of David Cronenberg. Once again, if the entanglement of human existence and the vegetal invites an ecological reading of Beckett’s work, such an ecology needs to be expanded in line with the recent thinking by critics and scholars such as Haraway (“natureculture”, Haraway 2003), Morton (“ecology without nature”, Morton 2007) or Hörl (“general ecology”, Hörl 2017), in order to cater to the complexities. Especially, I think it would be productive—and this gesture, once again, points to further exploration—to use the analysis of Hörl in discussing Beckett’s incisive and comical investigations of the onto-epistemological conditions of late modernity, that on the one hand, mercilessly, observe (human) existence as shaped by heteronomous forces and control mechanisms, and, on the other, opens up to a thinking that considers relationality and ecology as constitutive for the composition of subjectivities and experiences.

This also leads us back, finally, to *Stranger Things* and its nexus of plants, humans, and postwar technology; a nexus that was analyzed by Meeker and Szabari (2018) in the context of postwar techno-capitalism, and which might, as suggested here, offer a framework that engenders new readings of Beckett. Even if the vegetal subject in Beckett’s texts is no standard monster, there is definitely something of a Mind Flayer (of *Stranger Things*) in the entity that crawls in the mud and incessantly keeps on talking, telling, babbling, and disclosing dirty secrets of being that upset the established ideas of human existence. “Quaqu aquaqua”, says Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, “ququa”, it says in *How It Is*. As the standard companion to Beckett tells us, this is to be interpreted as philosophical parody in its frivolous usage of the Latin root “qua” (Ackerley and Gontarsky 2004, pp. 472–73). But it needs to be added here—“quaqua” is also a plant.

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Notes

- 1 See data from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (2016), https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2016_Statssumm/fires_acres16.pdf (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 2 Beckett’s early attention to plant life is observable, for instance, in his sharp essay on Proust (1931)—“It is significant”, Beckett writes of Proust’s work, “that the majority of his images are botanical. He assimilates the human to the vegetal. He is conscious of humanity as flora, never as fauna” (Beckett 2006b, p. 552). This kind of thinking would also feed into Beckett’s first, unpublished novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (finished in 1932 and published in 1992, three years after his death, in 1992), as is shown by Adam Michael Winstanley in his doctoral thesis (Winstanley 2013), where he reads this work with a focus on “dehiscence” and its relation to sexuality, energy, rhythm, and how this affects Beckett’s prose in the novel.
- 3 Apart from Proust, one may also mention, in the immediate cultural surroundings of Beckett, Georges Bataille and his essay “The Language of Flowers” (1929), published a year before Beckett was writing his essay, in which human life and plant life are entangled through questions of symbolism and morality, verticality and materialism, Earth and Sun, and so on (Bataille 1985, pp. 10–14).

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