The Limits of Heidegger’s Earth

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Introduction

Earth is a key concept in Heidegger’s later philosophy, suggesting many things. For instance, philosophers and humanities scholars alike have used it in various ways to think about the human relation to nature and the environment. Earth has also been used to romanticise Heidegger’s philosophy; we can counter the exploitation of nature by modern technology by retreating to special earthly places in harmony with nature. Earth suggests a materialist element in Heidegger’s thought, as well as a reactionary politics of “blood and soil.” My argument will take a different position from all of these. I will argue that Heidegger’s concept of earth is the “constitutive insufficiency” of modern technology. As such, it partakes of modern technology without being reducible to it. Heidegger’s earth needs to be understood as a surplus to technological Ge-stell (the ordering of human being to technology), opening technology otherwise. Understood in this way, Heidegger’s thinking of earth is neither romantic nor reactionary. It does not lead back to a pre-technological time, nor to a place of nature outside technology. Rather it thinks both with and against technology, in terms of what it is and
what it is not. Heidegger's concept of earth requires that we think of earth as the "not" of technology; as an enabling possibility of otherness: "Something . . . may acquire a positive phenomenal meaning in terms of what it is not." 4 At this point I will propose that this "not" of technology is its essence. In Heidegger's well-known phrase: "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological." 5 I will further propose that this essence is a "free relation to [technology]." Earth is the essence of technology in relating to it freely as other.

Although Heidegger's thinking of earth as the "not" of technology takes us some way towards a critique of the human relation to nature capable of countering technological thinking, 6 it is nevertheless subject to a limit. This limit concerns Heidegger's relapse into mythical thinking of the event of Being—a type of thinking that disarms critique in favour of passive waiting for the "other beginning," 7 where the new is always yet to arrive. Heidegger's critique of technology is not radical enough to supply the kind of critical and creative purchase onto actual technical formats and their residues to enable a new thought of otherness to take effect in the critique itself. A more radical account of the event of Being can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin, whose idea of play between a grounding "first" technology and an ungrounding "second" technology both historicises and demythifies the evental openness of Being as a contingent moment of possibility. 8 In this article, I will propose Benjamin's concept of the "play between" the complex of technology in a rethinking of the earth in terms of new beginnings, while retaining some of the insights gained from Heidegger's concept of earth. 9

My aim in presenting this critique of Heidegger's concept of earth and Benjamin's idea of the "play between" the complex of technology 10 is to open a space to think about the artwork as a counter-techne in the broader context of the environmental crisis facing humanity today. Environmental studies (and the humanities more generally) currently lacks a critique of technology as a praxis 11 capable of opening technology against itself. Such a critique becomes ontologically grounded in its own praxis: it "does what it says," thereby releasing human being from subjectification to technology in the critical activity itself. As part of the "event" of critique, art becomes the counter-techne that opens technology against itself, exposing human being to an open region, and leading to a different configuration with the being of nature released from the grip of technological enframing (Ge-stell). Such a critique is necessary, I argue, to prepare the way for a re-orientation of the critical effort to change the human relation to nature beyond current technological thinking. The article is divided into two parts: the first part elaborates on constitutive insufficiency applied to Heidegger's thinking of earth as the "not" of technology, and sets forth a general outline of what it is to think in
terms of earth as constitutive insufficiency. The second part develops a response to this elaboration through Benjamin’s idea of play as a release from technology.

Part 1

Insufficiency

What does the term “constitutive insufficiency” mean in Heidegger’s terms? Let me answer this question by outlining how Heidegger defines its opposite: sufficiency. In Lecture 5 of a series of lectures delivered in 1955-56 and published under the title The Principle of Reason, Heidegger makes the following comment on sufficiency:

In the background of the definition of sufficing, of sufficiency (of succinctio), there is the guiding idea of Leibnizian thinking—the idea of perfectio, that is, of the completeness [Vollständigkeit] of the determinations for the standing [Stehen] of an object [Gegenstand].

Following Heidegger’s lead here, we can say that something is said to be sufficient when it completes that of which it partakes. To take a perfectly routine example, a metal bolt is said to be sufficient for the task of securing a plate to a concrete slab. Its design and function “perfects” the technology for producing material structures. In Heidegger’s terms, the bolt is “used up” by the technology. Its reason for being is exhausted by its technical function. Or, to put this another way, the bolt “disappears into usefulness.” When our workaday lives are attuned to a world of Ge-stell, we experience this world only in terms of its sufficiency: its potential for completion. Everything we see around us is “used up” in the efficient completion of this world. However, in seeing everything as used up, we cannot see the technology for what it is. Its “being” becomes obscured by the clarity of the world it produces. Being is concealed by technology in the “not” of its own being.

If a sufficiency is defined by completion, then what is an insufficiency? An insufficiency is an incompletion: a failure to “measure up.” Suppose that in our endeavours to secure a plate to a concrete slab we found out that one of the bolts was cross-threaded and could not be used to tighten the plate. In what way is this bolt an insufficiency? Here we should be careful not to define insufficiency in terms of lack.

An insufficiency is not a lack, but a surplus: “Thus being accords itself by not fully according itself, and consequently the significance of the ‘negative’ as self-preserving concealment, a ‘negative’ which is not to suggest
deficiency. Rather, the ‘negative’ of Being, its self-unconcealing as concealment, is Being’s surplus [Überschuß] or plenitude.”¹⁹ A lack calls for a completion, and is thus remediated within the logic of sufficient reason. However, as a surplus—in refusing to be used up—the cross-threaded bolt stands out in its uselessness.²⁰ In remaining there as a singular thing, the bolt affirms itself “otherwise,” and enables us to see the technology in a new way “which still lies before us.”²¹ Here is the pertinent passage from Being and Time:

> Anything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way [as broken] disturbs us, and enables us to see the obstinacy of that with which we must concern ourselves in the first instance before we do anything else. With this obstinacy, the present-at-hand of the ready-to-hand makes itself known in a new way as the Being of that which still lies before us and calls for our attending to it.²²

In its refusal to be ready-to-hand, the bolt makes itself known in a “new way as the Being of that which still lies before us and calls for our attending to it.” In this new way, the bolt constitutes the technology “otherwise.” It affirms the “totality” of the technology as a world of involvements and assignments but in a way that leads outside itself into open possibility. In making itself known, the bolt “says” that the technology is not.²³ As a set of efficient technical assignments, the world must not announce itself. What the piece of broken equipment allows us to see is this “not.” The not of the world is its finitude, as distinct from the infinity of exchanges and assignments of a sufficient and calculable world.

> This saying of the “not” of technology calls for our attention, not in order to fix the broken apparatus, but to see the technology in that it is, in all its possible ways of being, as “that which still lies before us.” In this saying, the being of the technology is shifted from sufficiency to insufficiency; from closed completion to open incompleteness.

**Artwork**

A similar kind of shifting takes place in many works of modern art. Take Jeffrey Smart’s well-known painting entitled Cahill Expressway depicting an aspect of Sydney’s major freeway cutting through the city.²⁴ The painting presents us with a view of a flyover and tunnel, featuring a stark concrete wall curving from the left foreground and up to the right, with modern buildings and street-lights on long slender poles in the background. Standing on the pathway that runs beside the expressway as it disappears into the tunnel beneath the flyover is a masculine figure looking vacantly at the viewer.

> What relation does this painting have to the expressway? As an art-
work, the painting is not “used up” in its presentation of the expressway. Rather, it holds itself there; it stands where it is. In doing this, it “says” the Cahill Expressway “otherwise.” In this saying, something is moved across a threshold and affirmed there as something else. The painting says what the expressway is not. The painting allegorises this “not” through the figure of a lone human. What can we make of this figure? Like the cross-threading of the spirals of the bolt, the human figure interrupts the smooth curving lines of the expressway depicted in the painting. Far from completing the scene, the figure stands out in it, posing a question concerning its incompleteness. If you look closely you will see that the figure has only one arm. The empty sleeve of his jacket is tucked into the side pocket. He is incomplete, not whole. Furthermore, the figure looks out of place, not at home. He looks exposed and vulnerable. Standing there alone, he interrupts the smooth space of the expressway with its geometrical curves and linear outlines. The figure poses questions. Who is he? Why is he standing there?

In terms of constitutive insufficiency, the figure expresses an incompleteness; he does not fit in; does not measure up; his presence there is a surplus to the requirement of the efficient functioning of the expressway. There is also a sense that he should not be there, as if a transgression had taken place. In the background we see three figures standing on a podium, one of whom has an arm outstretched in a salute. What are we to make of the relationship between these three figures—all with their backs to us and perhaps expressing the heroic nature of the engineering structure—and the solitary, slightly comical figure beneath them? Is the man’s missing arm completed by the outstretched arm of the statue? And if so, what are we to make of that? Surely some sense of irony is at work here.

These questions destabilise any sense of the picture’s sufficiency—its capacity to “complete” the expressway. They pose questions about the perfection of the expressway reproduced in the painting in terms of curvilinear space, sending our relation with the expressway otherwise. Taking our cue from Jeffrey Smart’s Cahill Expressway, we can say that modern art does not complete a technologically produced world; rather it “says” this world otherwise. It is what the technology is not. To use a term that Heidegger employs in his analysis of Hölderlin’s poetry, the picture “poetizes” the expressway by turning it into a work of art.

A constitutive insufficiency is an incompleteness that enables a technology to be. In Heidegger’s terms, something is possible in this enabling sense, not because it is calculable or predictable, but because it can happen within finite circumstances—it is enabled by the situation: “being-possible belongs to Dasein’s ‘positive’ Being, and is primarily related to
Dasein’s ‘existing’.31 Enabled possibility is not a matter of choosing between possibilities set up in advance, but is the very fact that something could be otherwise—a fact built into what something already is: “to enable something here means to preserve it in its essence, to maintain it in its element.”32 The painting (entitled Cahill Expressway) is the possibility of the Cahill Expressway presented otherwise. It lights up a space of indeterminacy between the “sufficient” Cahill Expressway and what it is not. Through our encounter with Jeffrey Smart’s painting or indeed with the cross-threaded bolt, the technology obscured by the efficient functioning of the world is suddenly “lit up” in its possibilities.33 The “insufficient” work of art and the failed piece of equipment draw attention to the fact that in being what it is, technology can always be otherwise.34

To summarise: a constitutive sufficiency ensures that the technology keeps itself going in working order; whereas a constitutive insufficiency draws attention to the finite conditions under which this “keeping going” takes place, enabling a thinking “otherwise” of possibilities not anticipated by the technology in its efficient functioning. Sufficiency reproduces the world as the same; insufficiency withdraws from the sufficient world of the same in order to begin in another way.

Earth

To think of something in terms of its constitutive insufficiency is to think of it in terms of what it is not. By making us aware of its limits, the cross-threaded bolt allows us to see that the apparatus of fastening concrete slabs could always be otherwise. The technology is thus grounded in these possibilities.35 Its actual operation is simply one of any number of possibilities blocked from coming forth by the sufficiency of the current one.36 A constitutive insufficiency thus ungrounds the ground of technology and leads otherwise. All technology is grounded in the insufficiency of its own reason; in the incompletion of what is. Heidegger calls this insufficiency “earth.”37

Earth does not refer to the planet earth, the earthy fields, the rocks or soil, but to the “not” of modern technology. This “not” of technology is its withdrawal from use; its insufficiency in having to measure up to the demands of reason. The insufficiency of technology does not point to a lack calling for completion, but opens technology against itself and leads otherwise. Earth is the opening up of possibility in the space of technology’s incompletion.

To think the “not” of technology as earth we cannot leave technology behind; rather we need to think both with and against technology at the same time.38 We need to think both with and against the cross-threaded
bolt in its insufficiency; in the singular “there” that lights up when we encounter it as a broken and discarded thing. What lights up is not the bolt in isolation from everything else, but the “open region” —a space of immanent possibility hitherto blocked from coming about. Such thinking already happens in the work of art—in the work that the artwork does. Art is that which works with technology by working against it, shifting the earth with it: “the [artwork] moves the earth into the open of a world and holds it there. The work lets the earth be an earth.” The artwork earths technology in its possibilities, opening into what Heidegger calls the “other beginning.” Art’s relation to technology holds the key to a thinking of the earth in Heidegger’s philosophy.

**Between**

In this section of the article I want to examine a certain limitation in Heidegger’s proposal of earth as the “not” of technology. This limitation is not a delimitation (it does not limit my thinking of the earth to already determined values and meanings), but a constitutive positivity in the sense that it enables me to think of earth from the position that Heidegger establishes—but “otherwise.” It concerns a certain insufficiency built into Heidegger’s own thinking of the earth—an insufficiency both of the earth, and of Heidegger’s writing about it. This insufficiency opens up possibilities in the thought of the earth as the “between.” What does Heidegger mean by the “between”? In the “Letter on ‘Humanism’,” he says the following:

The human being is never first and foremost the human being on the hither side of the world, as “subject,” whether this is taken as “I” or “We.” Nor is he ever simply a mere subject that always simultaneously is related to objects, so that his essence lies in the subject-object relation. Rather, before all this, the human being in his essence is ek-sistent into the openness of being, into the open region that first clears the “between” within which a “relation” of subject to object can “be.”

In this passage, Heidegger says that the “between” comes “before” the subject-object relation in the sense of something irreducible to it: an “open region” where the human being exists (ek-sists) in the “openness of being.” This open region is the place of the “not” of being, which, as we have already seen in encountering the cross-threaded bolt and the work of art, is insufficient in not measuring up, in this case, to the self-identity called for in the simultaneity of the subject-object relation. In the “not” of being—in the insufficiency of the place between—human beings can be “otherwise.” Earth is this place of not-being: the “abyss” of freedom already filled with
If, for Heidegger, earth is the “between,” then precisely what does it come between? Throughout Heidegger’s middle period writings, earth is coupled with world. Heidegger says that earth is the “not” of the technologically produced world: the withdrawn possibility of a world yet to come forth. But in saying this, he also posits a difference between them: earth and world are separated by a “between” that brings them together. This indivisible remainder that comes “between” cannot be reduced to either earth or world, but must remain between as such.

What this means is that earth is “not earth” in being the earth that it is. Another way of saying this is that earth is insufficient for the task that Heidegger has set for it in his own critique. In enabling a technologically produced world to be, earth is itself opened by a further disjunction with the world. There must be the possibility of another earth in-between the earth and the world. This other earth disturbs the current earth-world relation, and makes it turn otherwise. This other earth cannot be reduced to an opposition to world without opening in-between into another earth and so on, in a proliferation of what I will call earth-beginnings. Here we are talking about a much more radical disjunction between earth and world than Heidegger would admit. In Heidegger’s terms, earth is the “self-seclusion” of Being: the withdrawal of Being into itself; whereas in the more radical sense I have suggested here, earth is the dissipation of Being: a proliferating spread of earth-world connections opening in the “between.”

In Heidegger’s terms, the withdrawal of earth “shelters” the human being, and preserves it for a destiny to be awaited. However, in the sense I am proposing here, earth does not shelter the human but exposes it to radical possibility. In this more radical sense, we do not await the event of a “new earth”; rather, the possibility of a new earth happens in the earth-beginnings that are already disturbing the current earth-world arrangement, sending it otherwise.

This new earth is indifferent to human being. Why? Because it no longer cares for the earth-world relation through which nature is currently being exploited. The earth’s indifference means that it no longer shelters human being but challenges it to be otherwise. In being challenged, we must take a risk; we must decide to be in the exposed space of the opening of the disturbed earth. Deciding to be does not mean sheltering in the self-identity of what we already are, but releasing ourselves to drift in the spread of earth-world connections forever withdrawing from us. What concerns us then, is not how to return the human to the protection of the earth, but how to make another earth in the exposure of the human to the “not” of the technologically produced world. Elsewhere I have called this “earthing possibility.”
the world.” This other earth is not an earth that retains its current relation to technology, but a new earth just beginning to appear in-between the current world and what it is not.

**Part 2**

**Play: Benjamin**

One of the major drawbacks of Heidegger’s thinking in his later philosophy is a tendency to fall back into myth. Instead of thinking earth as the opening of possibility in the “between,” Heidegger thinks it in terms of an already opened space where we await the event of Being (Ereignis) in order to recover our lost connection with it. This can be seen for instance in his readings of Hölderlin’s poems, which, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has argued, involve an act of “bad faith” in that they deny the “reality” of the poems as “an urgent demand for truth.” Heidegger’s readings elide the disruptive openness of Hölderlin’s poems in order to make them conform to a mythic sense of the “gathering” of a Germanic people associated with “German ideology.” Heidegger’s account of the event of Being is thus susceptible to remythification in terms of awaiting the “other beginning,” and closes itself off from the new as a radical disjuncture in the “between” of the poem and its possibilities. Is there an alternative account of the event of Being that does not relapse into myth; an account that remains in the openness of the event of Being in order to think earth as “other”? Here, we can turn to Walter Benjamin’s idea of “play” between what he calls “first” and “second” technologies.

In his well-known essay entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility,” Benjamin writes of a tremendous “shattering of tradition” brought on by technologies of mechanical and electronic reproduction. This shattering “liquidates” the relation of humans to objects and throws human being into a technological play that reorders the sense of the world according to techniques for making distant things near. Objects are released through a dissipating spread of technologically produced being so that they withdraw from us the closer we try to get to them. In this complex of technology, objects are already on their way to obsolescence the moment they begin to circulate. Benjamin’s well-known theory of aura as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be,” suggests that technologically produced objects are experienced as a withdrawal from presence. In this withdrawal, objects become things; they fall from objectivity when new technologies render existing technologies obsolete. Objects are always already becoming things.
Although no longer useful and ready-to-hand, things nevertheless retain a singular existence within the play of technology. They endure in the face of extinction.

The play that retains the life of things is a play between technologies: a first technology where things circulate in terms of a fusion with nature, and a second technology that engages with first technology, seeking distance from the natural world. In this play, possibilities appear as a faint flash—a glimmering, archaic residue triggered by the dissipating force of technological change. In an essay fragment entitled “The Lamp,” Benjamin describes one of these flashes when he remembers an old oil lamp from his childhood. The lamp brings back memories, but it does more than this; it prompts Benjamin to think about a lost connection with the “mimetic forces” of nature, which, in a modern technologically mediated world, can hardly be experienced at all. Benjamin notes that the lamp belongs to another time and to a different mode of being before modern lighting systems, when people had a more intimate relation with the world around them; where “you could carry [the lamp] through the entire apartment, accompanied always by the clatter of the tube in its casing and the glass globe on its metal ring—a clinking that is part of the dark music of the surf which slumbers in the laborious toil of the century.” Not only does the lamp bring back memories of the rituals of his childhood, it also awakens the “laborious toil” of the previous century with its slower pace and pre-electronic way of life. From the perspective of the present, the lamp reanimates the power of mimesis and renews the human connection to nature.

This nature is not “out there” beyond the technologically mediated world, but a material residue—an earth—that brings itself forth between current and outdated technologies. This residue surges like the “dark music of the surf,” carrying Benjamin’s memories with it. The very possibility of life is carried in this surging forth in-between the first technology of the oil lamp where things are fused in ritual and nature, and the second technology of electronic lighting and equipment that seeks to gain distance from the ritualised and naturalised world. In the “play” between first and second technologies, the thing is exposed to radical possibility.

Where Heidegger’s thinking of earth is limited by a retreat into old world technical thinking (a turn to techne as defined by Aristotle and pre-Socratic thinking), Benjamin’s thinking is defined by a radical engagement with technology as an event of dissipated being (aura). For Benjamin earth is diffused through the complex of technology as a dissipation of being spreading on a cosmic scale, yet locatable in contingent moments of flashing connectivity. Being is carried through the complex of technology as an emergence and withdrawal into the abyssal “nothing” of not-being.
In the modern technological world, there is no sheltering earth, but the singular exposure to a fragile event of possibility. Benjamin calls this exposure the “moment of birth” of cosmic being: a moment that “flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast.” This moment of birth opens up a space in-between prevailing and emerging technologies such that the ground of technology is itself disturbed. This disturbance manifests itself as a flash that illuminates things in terms of their cosmic meaning. What are these things? The things that flash in-between can be called fallen objects: things no longer ready-to-hand. An old lamp, a broken down television set abandoned by the side of the road, an obsolete computer drive lying stuffed in a corner cupboard. Fallen objects are objects-becoming-things. Such object-things are always withdrawing from us into the oblivion of being—the “not” of technological sufficiency. But in their “thingness,” they can regain the power to be. In being in-between, they light up possibility, and “speak” otherwise. The challenge is this: how do we encounter such things? What are they saying to us? And how do we release them from their plight?

**A Pair of Pliers**

In my travels, I had occasion to visit a scrap metal yard in the town of Ararat in country Victoria, where I took a number of photographs. My purpose was to take photographs of things as fallen objects: things that once circulated in a technologically produced world as useful items or pieces of equipment, but whose life in that world had since ceased. As discarded items, they had fallen out of that world, yet there they were, not yet obliterated, somehow awaiting my camera.

My concern was not with patterns or beautiful arrangements, but with the things themselves and how they called out to me. All of the things I photographed lay strewn around in huge piles and jumbles of things-in-general (Figure 1).
What caught my eye was not the gathering in its multiplicity, but the singularity of things. This singularity was not defined by obtrusiveness in the same way that the cross-threaded bolt obtruded in the efficiency of equipment, since there were no efficiently functioning things at hand and nothing seemed to fit in with any kind of overall pattern. This was truly a graveyard of things. However, even in a graveyard life goes on. In their silent withdrawal from the world, the things retained a faint life, as if they were calling to me. What did they want?

One of the things that caught my eye was a pair of rusty old pliers sunk down into the ground, half exposed to the sky (Figure 2). It is as if the pliers were resisting their fate in the annihilation that certainly awaited them through human neglect and the passage of time. In withdrawing from me and sinking back into the ground, they had not quite disappeared, coming to a stand here at this place where I encountered them. No longer functioning as a useful tool, they nevertheless retain their tool-like shape that continues to speak of their meaning as useful equipment. No longer adequate for the task of holding and gripping objects, they constitute an insufficiency of equipment—they “say” what they are, but “otherwise,” in terms of what they are not.
In not being an efficient tool for gripping things, they constitute the entire technology of holding and gripping, but from a position that speaks otherwise. In seeing the pliers in this way, I begin to hear them saying different things. For instance, I note that strewn around the pliers are tiny pieces of sand, pebbles, grit and dead leaves. This detritus reminds me of the elemental nature of the pliers; the original heterogeneity of the material elements of which they are made. In their random disposition, they also remind me of a certain cosmic connectivity, where each thing is directly connected to others things in what Benjamin calls the mimetic power of nature. The red rust of the decomposing pliers also reminds me of their connection with the earth: the pliers-thing flashes with cosmic connectivity. By calling on me to think about these connections, I feel myself released from the world of efficient objects, and begin instead to think about other things, for instance, what it truly means to grip and hold the world.

The pliers call on me to think about the power to hold the world together. By sinking into the earth, they suggest to me how the human grip on the world can be loosened and released. In being released from the grip on the world, they suggest a possibility that they could not suggest in their function as efficient equipment. This is because, as efficient equipment, the pliers can only be thought of and used in terms of different ways of gripping the world and not in terms of letting go. However, as a fallen object—as an object-becoming-thing—the pliers “say” what it is to grip the world “otherwise”: they tell me that a grip is always enabled by the possibility of a letting go—of a release. The image tells me that the human relation to technology is itself enabled by a release from technology that is nevertheless covered over. By taking the photograph, I uncover this concealed possibility, bring it to light, and present it to you. By taking the photograph, I release the pliers.
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into the oblivion of being so that they can shine there—even if just for a moment—to tell us something about how we might let go of the world. In this letting go, we are given the chance to begin again in the earth opening up before us. This beginning begins not in the old world of the technological exploitation of nature, but in a new earth-world relation enacted at this place, where technology no longer grips the world but plays along with it. My encounter with the pliers constitutes another earth-beginning: a brief moment in which a possibility of being otherwise happens. In this possibility new thoughts, new modes of being appear, calling for further elaboration and connection.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Martin Heidegger’s concept of earth needs to be understood as the “between.” Earth is that which comes between, opening otherwise. In the place of this between, possibilities can be seen. But in what way? And why should we want to see them at all? I argue that we need to see these possibilities in what they can tell us about our current earth-world relation, especially in the way it sustains the exploitation of nature. Heidegger’s thinking of the earth, especially in relation to the artwork and technology, takes us part of the way towards this way of seeing. However, Heidegger’s thinking is subject to a limit that retreats from a radically conceived concept of earth, leading not forward but back into mythic re-connection with nature, closing off connectivity with the new. A way forward can be found with Walter Benjamin’s concept of play in between first and second technology. Play between withdrawing and advancing technologies opens up a place of otherness from which we can rethink the human-technology relation in terms of the dissipating spread of earth-beginnings—fragile events of possibility drifting across the space-time continuum. From these obscure places, objects can be rescued from extinction and allowed to speak to us “otherwise.”

In this saying, we are oriented into a new way of being, not outside technology but with and against it. We need to release this new way of saying-being by encountering things in what they call for—what they want. A new poetics that encounters things in their resistance to technology will lead us away from a sufficient world of objects and into the insufficiency of a world of things now just starting to form. In these new earth-beginnings, we can fashion this world of things into another world, a world that does not exploit nature but plays in the between—in the always open possibility of another world, another beginning.
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NOTES

1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented to the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy conference, University of Western Sydney, Parramatta campus, December 3-5, 2013.
2 Andrew Mitchell, Heidegger Among the Sculptors (Stanford: University Press, 2010), 22.
3 For Heidegger, technology is the way things are “brought forth.” See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 10-11. Modern technology is a bringing forth as production. See John Lосerbo, Being and Technology: a Study in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 119. From a Heideggerian perspective, technology should not be reduced to a matter of machines or technical systems, but to the way humans are ordered to a “way of being” defined technologically—as subject to a production (technological Bestellen). That which modern technology brings forth is itself. Technology “enframes” (Ge-stell) human being: orders it into a technologically produced way of being. That which is produced is the subject. See Agamben on the apparatus as technological Ge-stell: “apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject.” Giorgio Agamben, What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays, trans. David Kishik and Steffan Pedatella (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11.
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6 By technological thinking I mean the thinking of the sufficiency of same, unable to see past current technological formats and their underlying assumption of the unlimited ordering and expansion of technē – the mode of technological being that “calls” the human to it – through the exploitation of natural resources.

7 Martin Heidegger, Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning), trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 4.


9 By “complex of technology” I refer to the remediated interrelation between diverse and competing technologies in their struggle to “ground” human experience in nature. The complex of technology is characterised by a retroactive projection of nature as myth by what Benjamin calls a “first” technology (the prevailing technology of an era), and challenges to it by an emerging “second” technology that ungrounds this myth through play. See Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 107. For ground as a complex of historically defined technologies see Warwick Mules, With Nature: Nature Philosophy as Poetics through Schelling, Heidegger, Benjamin and Nancy, (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), 159-76.


13 “But the work to be produced is not merely usable for something. The production itself is a using of something for something” (Being and Time, 100). The work here is not attributable merely to the local use of bolting a plate to a concrete slab. Rather, work is an instance of the use of an entire technology for producing things.


15 Heidegger, “Origin,” 24. See also Being and Time: “the peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must as it were, withdraw [zuruckzuziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically” (99).

16 Heidegger calls this kind of seeing “circumspection” (Being and Time, 98).

17 Heidegger makes a distinction between being and Being. Being with a capital B refers to the fact that beings must share a common being irreducible to their own being. In Heidegger’s philosophy, this common being is designated by the capitalisation of the word Being. The relation between Being and being is what Heidegger calls “ontological difference.” See Martin Heidegger, The Basic Problems of Phenomenology, revised ed., trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: University Press), 17.
"When equipment cannot be used, this implies that the constitutive assignment of the ‘in-order-to’ to a ‘towards-this’ has been disturbed. The assignments themselves are not observed; they are rather ‘there’ when we concernfully submit ourselves to them [Sichsgtellen unter sie]. But when an assignment has been disturbed – when something is unusable for some purpose—then the assignment becomes explicit . . . The context of the equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted before hand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself” (Being and Time, 105). This announcing itself of the world should not be confused with circumspective seeing (which can only see the world as sufficient and complete). Rather, the world is seen here in its constitutive insufficiency, as world that could be otherwise.

Loscerbo, Being and Technology, 157.

Heidegger calls this “the conspicuousness of the unusable” (Being and Time, 104).

Ibid., 104.

Ibid., 103-4.

Ibid., 105.

“if it is to be possible for the ready-to-hand not to emerge from its inconspicuousness, the world must not announce itself” (Being and Time, 106).


“The sculptor uses stone just as, in his own way, the mason uses it. But he does not use it up” (Heidegger, “Origin,” 25).


Viewing an artwork is thus ontologically transitive. Heidegger comments on the transitivity of the viewer’s relation with Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of field worker’s shoes: “the equipment being of equipment was only discovered by bringing ourselves before the Van Gogh painting. It is this that spoke. In proximity to the work we were suddenly somewhere other than we are usually accustomed to be” (“Origin,” 15).

For Heidegger’s account of allegory and symbol in Hölderlin’s poetry see Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 16 ff.

Heidegger, Hölderlin’s Hymn, 19.

Loscerbo, Being and Technology, 163. Dasein refers to the “being-there” of the human: a pre-subjective, ek-static mode of being.

Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’,” trans. Frank A. Capuzzi. Pathmarks,


34 Heidegger notes that “what is thus lit up is not itself just one thing ready-to-hand amongst others; still less is it something present-at-hand upon which equipment ready-to-hand is somehow founded: it is in the ‘there’ before anyone has observed or ascertained it” (*Being and Time*, 105). It is “laid open,” not holding itself in the same.

35 For Heidegger something is always grounded in its possibilities. This means that an actual thing such as a rose is not-being; in its “thing-ness,” it withdraws from the possibilities of being this or that type of rose: “this rose [that] stands alone, simply is a rose” (*Principle of Reason*, 38). In simply being there, the rose is “simultaneously an affirmation and a negation of the same thing, namely of grounds . . . Therefore these grounds are abysmal” (36-7).

36 This thinking of enabled possibility is equivalent to the idea of possibility in quantum mechanics where the position of a particle is diacritically related to all the other possible positions within a dynamic space/time field. The other positions remain part of the actual position of the particle but in a virtual sense. The particle remains constitutively insufficient; that is, incompletely whole.

37 In the analysis of equipment in Section 15 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger indicates that in the use of equipment, nature is discovered. What he means by nature is the nature that “stirs and strives” (*Being and Time*, 100) and which remains hidden in equipment use. Nature in this sense is what he will later call earth: the withdrawn ground of possibility in the “not” of technological order. In “The Origin of the Work of Art” essay, Heidegger says that the earth is “that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back—as, indeed, the very thing that it is—and sheltered” (“Origin,” 21). Heidegger is using as his example an ancient Greek temple. However, it becomes much more problematic to speak of earth in this manner if we use examples from the modern world. In the modern world the earth is irreparably split away from the world—a withdrawal of Being—such that an attunement between them, as was once the case in the ancient Greek world, can now no longer occur. Rather, all that can be hoped for are localised moments of earth-world connectivity. From these we can build another world. As an open region of ungrounding, earth does not shelter; rather it enables in the possibility of something coming about.


41 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 4.

42 For Heidegger, the relation between art and technology should not be understood in terms of aesthetics (reduction of the artwork to subjective states). Rather the art-technology relation is concerned with an evental poetics enabled by the artwork in its affirmation of otherness ek-statically ungrounded from technology in the openness of free being.


Heidegger calls this withdrawn possibility the “saving power” of technology. See “Question,” 28.


Here, we can think of earth as Ursprung, or originary irruption in eternal beginningness.


Heidegger cannot think of the between in terms of dissipation but only in terms of gathering and unity: “The setting up of a world and the setting forth of the earth are two essential traits belonging to the work-being of the work. Within the unity of that work-being, however, they belong together” (“Origin,” 26). The “unity” of the work-being brings the earth and world together; but, as I have already indicated, this unity is at best temporary and contingent, as it must be disjoined by the further work that comes between them, triggering a dissipation of being in-between.


Heidegger’s example of the peasant woman’s shoes that vibrate with “the silent call of the earth” indicates this protective-belonging of equipment as things. However, in modern industrialised worlds—the world of Ge-stell—there is no protective-belonging of equipment. Equipment as technology sets upon the earth. The earth is no longer attuned with the world, but indifferent to it. The silent call of the earth is no longer one that resonates with protective care, but calls forth danger.

Earth is indifferent to human concerns insofar as it gives without asking for anything back. If earth were concerned with human being then it would want to have a say in what kind of being human beings should have. This is not the role of earth, but of modern teche. The irreversible separation of Being and beings in modernity and the withdrawal of Being into self-seclusion means that there can be no turning out of technology to recover an essential relation with Being, only a dwelling in the void of the Opening. We can only “see” Being as a vestige—a lightning flash; the lightning flash does not lead to the recovery of Being but to the melancholia of the abandonment of being. In evolutionary terms, human being has evolved into a state of absolute freedom cut off from primordial nature.


Lacoue-Labarthe, _Heidegger and the Politics_, 44. See also Mules, _With Nature_,


See note 9.


Ibid., 107.


Ibid.

This fusing of ritual and nature should not be understood objectively as if it could be kept separate from our thinking of it; rather, the fusion of ritual and nature needs to be understood as a retroactive projection that happens in the between. We retroactively project a mythic fusion with nature in earlier technology in order to gain distance from it.


The nature of the pair of pliers here is its obsolescence: its “death” in outliving its purpose. To rest in its own nature is to let it be, and to allow it to speak of its refusal to not be; not to force it into being something else, for example, a failed object. In Heidegger’s terms, “we must allow [the thing] to rest in its own nature” (“The Origin,” 12).