

The Content of Nothing, Part 1: The Ether.

Extract from *The Environing Air*, Judy Spark 2012.

Heidegger explains how it is that we can be aware of the world through a piece of equipment; such as the hammer he shows us in *Being and Time* in 1926. By its appearance, its weight, how it feels in the hand, the hammer speaks of hammering. It is an object so fit for purpose that it does not get in the way of our focus on the task in hand, that of hammering (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 99). Our concern then lies with the work, rather than the tool because it withdraws as it is encountered within the referential totality the work bears; through this totality the world announces itself to us (99; 105). "Readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*) is the mode of Being that Heidegger assigns to such equipment; we are aware of the being of the world through the worldly characteristics of the object (99; 102).

It is possible to see how the phone mast or communications tower conforms to this in some ways; its situation high up on a hill creating a relationship with the sky, the absence of any physical objects in the space around its higher points, the orientation of those points, drums, bars or wire aerials attached to it, all seem to allude to the immateriality of what may be taking place around it. In fact, it is hard to associate the structure with any purpose other than communication. It has the look then of being fit for purpose but it is still a problematic object in the sense that it is difficult to work out the exact variety of that purpose, and in this respect the thing can sometimes seem to take on sinister aspects. In addition, I myself have no natural wave awareness; I need to be in possession of another piece of equipment, a mobile phone handset connected to the appropriate network, for there to be even a possibility that I might make use of this installation. Certainly the structure itself, and even the handset, withdraws as we speak to a friend or listen to a broadcast, but we are not brought in closer proximity to the world by way of the object. In fact, apart from the content of the conversation in which I am engaging, it may have the opposite effect by contributing to the closing off of the world to our concern. It is only if the signal fades, is cut, or if there is interference, that the equipment begs any consideration at all. We may then question the origination of the signal, the weather conditions, or what lies between us and the place the signal may be travelling from that might be blocking it, for instance the walls of the tunnel that the train I am on is passing through. What is happening through this process of "malfunction," Heidegger concludes, is that ready-to-hand equipment is made conspicuous by the fact that it has lost its readiness-to-hand and has attained the property of "un-readiness-to-hand" or presence-to-hand (*Vorhandenheit*); the thing is present as equipment but it is un-useable (102), something humans find very frustrating.

[Later, in 1956, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger develops these themes, of Readiness and Unreadiness to hand, further in order to address 'modern' technology. He is attempting to get us to question beyond our general assumption of what technology is: i.e., "a means to an end", which does not take us closer to its 'essence', which is less to do with what it *is* and more to do with what it *means*].