

Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory¹

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Abstract

This paper seeks to introduce cultural techniques to an Anglophone readership. Specifically geared towards an Anglophone readership, the paper relates the re-emergence of cultural techniques (a concept first employed in the 19th century in an agricultural context) to the changing intellectual constellation of postwar Germany. More specifically, it traces how the concept evolved from – and reacted against – so-called German media theory, a decidedly anti-hermeneutic and anti-humanist current of thought frequently associated with the work of Friedrich Kittler. Post-hermeneutic rather than anti-hermeneutic in its outlook, the reconceptualization of cultural techniques aims at presenting them as chains of operations that link humans, things, media and even animals. To investigate cultural techniques is to shift the analytic gaze from ontological distinctions to the ontic operations that gave rise to the former in the first place. As Siegert points out, this shift recalls certain concurrent developments within the North American posthumanities; the paper therefore also includes a discussion of the similarities and differences between German and North American posthumanism.

Keywords

cultural techniques, Germany, Friedrich Kittler, media theory, post-hermeneutics

Media Theory in Germany since the 1980s

In the 1920s Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* proclaimed that the critique of reason had become the critique of culture (see Cassirer, 1955: 80). Over half a century and one world war later, so-called

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German media theory suggested an alternative formula: *The critique of reason becomes the critique of media*. The two axioms are difficult to reconcile; it therefore comes as no surprise that in the wake of German reunification and the subsequent country-wide reconstitution of cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaften*), a war has been waged that pits 'culture' against 'media'. The stakes are considerable. Both parties are striving to inherit nothing less than the throne of the transcendental that has remained vacant since the abdication of the 'critique of reason'. The struggle has been concealed by a rapid succession of 'turns' and repeated attempts at pacifying the combatants by introducing ecumenical monikers like 'cultural media studies' (*kulturwissenschaftliche Medienforschung*). Around the turn of the century the war of and over German cultural studies witnessed the re-emergence of the old concept of 'cultural techniques'. Since this particular term covers a lot of what Anglophone regions like to label 'German Media Theory', it is necessary to step back and take another look at the latter in order to explain to the other side of the Channel and the Atlantic how the notion of cultural techniques' development affects – and differs from – so-called German Media Theory (for more on this observer construct see Winthrop-Young, 2006; Horn, 2007; Peters, 2008).

The difficult reception of 'German Media Theory' in Britain and North America is linked to its marked recalcitrance: it never aspired to join the Humanities in their usual playground. What arose in the 1980s in Freiburg and has come to be associated with names such as Friedrich Kittler, Klaus Theweleit, Manfred Schneider, Norbert Bolz, Raimar Zons, Georg-Christoph Tholen, Jochen Hörisch, Wolfgang Hagen, Avital Ronell (and maybe also my own) was never able to give itself an appropriate name. It definitely wasn't 'media theory'. One of the early candidates was 'media analysis' (*Medienanalyse*), a term designed to indicate a paradigmatic replacement of both psychoanalysis and discourse analysis (thus affirming both an indebtedness to and a technologically informed distancing from Lacan and Foucault).

The 'media and literature analysis' – to invoke another short-lived label – that emerged in the 1980s was not overly concerned with the theory or history of individual media. It had no intention of competing with film studies, television studies, computer science, or other such disciplines. Instead it focused primarily on literature in order to explore new histories of the mind, of the soul and of the senses. These were removed from the grasp of literary studies, philosophy, and psychoanalysis and instead transferred to a different domain: media. 'Media analysis as a frame of reference for other things', I read in the minutes of a 1992 meeting of the pioneers of the nameless science convened to sketch the future shape of media research in Germany. However, the term *media* did not identify a focus or a clearly defined set of objects ripe for investigation; instead it indicated a change of the frame of reference for the

analysis of phenomena hitherto under the purview of the established humanities. In Kittler's (in)famous words, it was a matter of 'expelling the spirit from the humanities' (see Kittler, 1980). To repeat, the objects of research that defined communication studies (press, film, television, radio – that is, primarily *mass* media) were never of great interest. Literature and media analysis replaced the emphasis on authors or styles with a sustained attention to inconspicuous technologies of knowledge (e.g., index cards, writing tools and typewriters), discourse operators (e.g., quotation marks), pedagogical media (e.g., blackboards), unclassifiable media such as phonographs or stamps, instruments like the piano, and disciplining techniques (e.g., language acquisition and alphabetization). These media, symbolic operators, and drill practices, all of which are located at the base of intellectual and cultural shifts, make up for the most part what we now refer to as cultural techniques. As indicated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's famous catchphrase, this reorientation aimed to replace the hegemony of understanding, which inevitably tied meaning to a variant of subjectivity or self-presence, with 'the materialities of communication' (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, 1988) – the non-hermeneutic non-sense – as the base and abyss of meaning. As a result, little attention was paid to the question of what was represented in the media, or how and why it was represented in one way and not in another. In contrast to content analysis or the semantics of representation, German media theory shifted the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation, from semantics to the exterior and material conditions that constitute semantics. Media therefore was not only an alternative frame of reference for philosophy and literature but also an attempt to overcome French theory's fixation on discourse by turning it from its philosophical or archaeological head on to its historical and technological feet. While Derrida's (1998) diagnosis of Rousseau's orality remained stuck in a thoroughly ahistorical phonocentrism, this orality was now referred to historico-empirical cultural techniques of maternally centred 18th-century oral pedagogy (Kittler, 1990: 27–53). Derrida's (1987) 'postal principle', in turn, was no longer a metaphor for *différance* but a marked reminder that difference always already comes about by means of the operating principles of technical media (Siegert, 1999; Winthrop-Young, 2002). The exteriority of Lacan's signifier now also involved its implementation according to the different ways in which the real was technologically implemented. Last but not least, the focus on the materiality and technicality of meaning constitution prompted German media theorists to turn Foucault's concept of the 'historical apriori' into a 'technical apriori' by referring the Foucauldian 'archive' to media technologies.

This archaeology of cultural systems of meaning, which some chose to vilify by affixing the ridiculous label of media or techno-determinism, was (in Nietzsche's sense of the word) a gay science. It did not write media

history but extracted it from arcane sources (arcane, that is, from the point of view of the traditional humanities) at a time when nobody had yet seriously addressed the concept of media. Moreover, it was not passion for theory that made renegade humanities scholars focus their attention on media as the material substrate of culture but archival obsession. And the many literature scholars, philosophers, anthropologists and communication experts, who were suddenly forced to realize how much there was beyond the hermeneutic reading of texts when it came to understanding the medial conditions of literature and truth or the formation of humans and their souls, were much too offended by this sudden invasion into their academic habitat to ask what theoretical justification lay behind this forced entry.

In other words, what set German media theory on a collision course with Anglo-American media studies as well as with communication studies and sociology, all of which appeared bewitched by the grand directive of social enlightenment to exclusively ponder the role of media within the public sphere, was the act of abandoning mass media and the history of communication in favour of those insignificant, unprepossessing technologies that underlie the constitution of meaning and tend to escape our usual methods of understanding. And here we come face to face with a decisive feature of this post-hermeneutic turn towards the exteriority/materiality of the signifier: there is no subject area, no ontologically identifiable domain that could be called 'media'. Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan already emphasized that the decision taken by communication studies, sociology and economics to speak of media only in terms of mass media is woefully insufficient. Any approach to communication that places media exclusively within the 'public sphere' (which is itself a fictional construct bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment) will systematically misconstrue the abyss of non-meaning in and from which media operate. For those eager to disentangle themselves from the grip of Critical Theory, according to which media were responsible for eroding the growth of autonomous individuality and the alienation from authentic experiences (a diagnosis preached to postwar West Germany by an opinionated conglomerate composed of the Frankfurt School, the Suhrkamp publishing house, newspapers like *Die Zeit*, social sciences and philosophy departments, and bourgeois feuilletons), this abyss was referred to as 'war'. If the telegraph, the telephone or the radio were analysed as mass media at all, then it was with a view towards uncovering their military origin and exposing the negative horizon of war of mass media and their alleged public status. Hence the enthusiasm with which the early work of Paul Virilio was received in these circles (e.g., Virilio, 1989, 1994). Hence also the eagerness with which a materialities-based 'media analysis' already early on sought out allies among those historians of science who in the 1980s abandoned the history of theory in lieu of a non-teleological history of practices and technologies enacted

and performed in laboratories, instruments and 'experimental systems' (e.g., Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Rheinberger, 1997; Schmidgen, forthcoming).

'Public sphere' versus 'war': this was the polemical restriction under which German media theory of the 1980s assumed its distinct shape. To invoke the 'public sphere' was to invoke ideas such as enlightened consciousness, self-determination, freedom and so on, whereas to speak of 'war' implied an unconscious processed by symbolic media and the notion that 'freedom' was a kind of narcissism associated with the Lacanian mirror stage. Against the 'communicative reason' as an alleged *telos* of mass media, and against the technophobe obsession with semantic depth, the partisans of the unmoored signifier embraced the history of communication engineering that had been blocked out by humanist historiography. However, the history of communication was not simply denied; continuing Heidegger's history of being (*Seinsgeschichte*), it now appeared as an epoch of media rather than a horizon of meaning (see Heidegger, 2002). The goal was to reconceptualize media by moving away from the established 'logocentric' narrative that starts out with the immediacy of oral communication, passes through a differentiation into scriptographic and typographic media and then leads to the secondary orality of radio.

But if media are no longer embedded in a horizon of meaning, if they no longer constitute an ontological object, how can they be approached and observed? Answer: by reconstructing the discourse networks in which the real, the imaginary and the symbolic are stored, transmitted and processed. Is every history of paper already a media history? Is every history of the telescope a media history? Or every history of the postal system? Clearly, no. The history of paper only turns into a media history if it serves as a reference system for the analysis of bureaucratic or scientific data processing. When the chancelleries of Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen replaced parchment with paper, this act decisively changed the meaning of 'power' (Vismann, 2008: 79, 84). The history of the telescope, in turn, becomes a media history if it is taken as a system of reference for an analysis of seeing (Vogl, 2007). Finally, a history of the postal system is a media history if it serves as the system of reference for a history of communication (Siegert, 1999). That is to say, media do not emerge independently and outside of specific historical practices. Yet at the same time history is itself a system of meaning that operates across a media-technological abyss of non-meaning that must remain hidden. The insistence on these media reference systems, designed as an attack on the reason- or mind-based humanist reference systems, was guided by a deeply anti-humanist rejection of the tradition of the Enlightenment and the established discursive rules of hermeneutic interpretation. This constitutes both a similarity and a difference between German media theory and that prominent portion of American posthumanist discourse

which is rooted in the history of cybernetics. Within the US, the notion of the 'posthuman' emerged from a framework defined by the blurring of the boundaries between man and machine. However, while US post-cybernetic media studies are tied to thinking about bodies and organisms, German media theory is linked to a shift in the history of meaning arising from a revolt against the hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation and the sociological tradition of communication. As a result there is a discernible difference between the cybernetically grounded American 'posthuman' and the continental 'posthumanism' rooted in Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan. Within the framework of cybernetics, the notion of 'becoming human' had as its point of departure an anthropologically stable humanity of the human that endured until increasing feedback systems subjected the 'human' to increasing hybridizations, in the course of which the 'human' turned either into a servomechanism attached to machines and networks, or into a machine programmed by alien software (see Hayles, 1999, 2010). By contrast, French (and German) posthumanism signalled that the humanities had awakened from their 'anthropological slumber'. This awakening, in turn, called for an anti-hermeneutic posthumanism able to deconstruct humanism as an occidental transcendental system of meaning production. For the Germans, the means to achieve this goal were 'media'. The guiding question for German media theory, therefore, was not *How did we become posthuman?* but *How was the human always already historically mixed with the non-human?*

But it was not until the new understanding of media led to the focus on cultural techniques that this variant of posthumanism was able to discern affinities with the actor-network ideas of Bruno Latour and others. Now German observers were able to discern that something similar had happened in the early 2000s in the United States, when the advent and merging of Critical Animal Studies and post-cybernetic studies brought about a new understanding of media as well as a reconceptualization of the posthuman as always already intertwined between human and non-human.

'Media' after the Postwar Era: Cultural Techniques

If the first phase of German media theory (from the early 1980s to the late 1990s) can be labelled anti-hermeneutic, the second phase (from the late 1990s to the present), which witnessed the conceptual transformation of media into cultural techniques, may be labelled post-hermeneutic. Underneath this change, which served to relieve media and technology of the burden of having to play the bogeyman of hermeneutics and Critical Theory, there was a second rupture that only gradually came to light. The new conceptual career of cultural techniques was linked to nothing less than the end of the intellectual postwar era in Germany.

The technophobia of the humanities, the imperative of Habermasian ‘communicative reason’, the incessant warnings against the manipulation of the masses by the media – all of this arose from the experiences of the Second World War and came to be part and parcel of the moral duty of the German postwar intellectual. (At a lecture at the Collège International de Philosophie in 1984, addressing among others Jürgen Habermas and Dieter Henrich, Werner Hamacher polemically characterized German postwar philosophy after Heidegger and Adorno as ‘reparation payments’ to Anglo-Saxon common-sense rationalism and philosophies of norms and normativity.) But it was also precisely that against which the anti-hermeneutic techno-euphoria of ‘media analysis’ and the media-materialist readings of French theory rebelled. To polemically confront the public sphere with war, to oppose the technophobia of Critical Theory with Foucauldian discourse analysis, the machinic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari, or the posthumanist Lacanian logic of the signifier, was no less a symptom of the German postwar. Not surprisingly, US intellectuals who had received poststructuralism as a kind of ‘negative New Criticism’ had difficulties coming to grips with the polemical tone that permeated Kittler’s writings (Winthrop-Young, 2011).

It was, ironically, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR that helped re-direct German postwar media theory. Cultural Studies (*Kulturwissenschaften*), which in 1990 no longer existed in West Germany but had been practised in the GDR, now became one of the few Eastern heirlooms to gain acceptance in the newly united Germany. As a result, much of what maybe should not have been referred to as ‘media’, but was nonetheless assigned that label in order to be polemically deployed against long-standing hermeneutic aspirations and Critical Theory’s yearning for a non-alienated existence, could now be designated as cultural techniques. The war was over – and all the index cards, quotation marks, pedagogies of reading and writing, Hindu-Arabic numerals, diagrammatic writing operators, slates, pianofortes, and so on were given a new home. This implied, first, that on both a personal and an institutional level media history and research came to abandon the shelter granted by literature departments. I myself left the institutional spaces of *Germanistik* (the study of German language and literature) in 1993 to become an assistant professor of the History and Aesthetics of Media in the re-established Institut für Kultur- und Kunstwissenschaft at the Humboldt University in the former East Berlin. Second, by virtue of their promotion to the status of cultural techniques, media were now more than merely a ‘different’ frame of reference for the analysis of literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis. Third, given their new conceptual status it now became possible to endow media with their ‘own’ history and lay the groundwork for more systematic theoretical definitions. Fourth, critical attention no longer focused on revealing which media technologies provided the ‘hard’ base of the chimeras known as

‘spirit’ (*Geist*), understanding, or the public sphere. The focus is now culture itself. Nowhere is this reorientation of German media theory more noticeable than in the changed attitude towards anthropology. During the postwar phase anthropology was as ostracized as ‘man’ himself – whom Kittler famously kept debunking as ‘so-called man’ (*der sogenannte Mensch*). With the shift to cultural techniques, German media theory adopted a considerably more relaxed attitude towards an historical anthropology that relates cultural communication to technologies rather than to anthropological constants. By latching on to the old concept of cultural techniques, it signals its interest in ‘anthropotechnics’ (e.g., see Schüttpelz, 2006) – though it remains doubtful whether this indicates an ‘anthropological turn’ (Siegert, 2007).

As indicated above, this postwar turn from anti-humanism to post-humanism appears to resemble the US turn from a somewhat restricted understanding of posthumanism as a form of transhumanism (i.e., the biotechnological hybridization of human beings) to a more complex programme of *posthumanities* eager to put some distance between itself and old notions of the posthuman (see Wolfe, 2010). To be sure, what both turns have in common is a reluctance to interpret the ‘post’ in posthuman in an historical sense, as something that comes ‘after the human’. Rather, in both cases the ‘post’ implies a sense of ‘always already’, an ontological entanglement of human and non-human. However, the non-human of the cultural techniques approach is related in the first instance to matters of technique and technology, that of the American posthumanities to biology and the biological. In North America the turn from the posthuman to the posthumanities is indebted to deconstruction; more to the point, it follows from the older Derrida’s questioning of ‘the animal’. In short, the German focus on the relationship between humans and machines finds its American counterpart in the questioning of the equally precarious relationship between humans and animals (Winthrop-Young, 2009).

But although the discussion of the man–machine–animal difference (i.e., the anthropological difference) also plays an important part in German discussions, and despite the links between German notions of cultural techniques and the French confluence of anthropology and technology that is now of such great importance to the American debate, critical trans-Atlantic differences remain. While the American side pursues a deconstruction of the anthropological difference with a strong ethical focus, the Germans are more concerned with technological or medial fabrications or artifices. From the point of view of the cultural techniques approach, anthropological differences are less the effect of a stubborn anthropo-phallo-carno-centric metaphysics than the result of culture-technical and media-technological practices. The difference is especially apparent in the ‘zoological’ works of German cultural sciences that tend to be less concerned with discussions of Heidegger, Nietzsche,

Agamben and Derrida than with the medial functions of animals – that is, with the way in which cultural techniques like domestication, breeding, or sacrificial practices in connection with the emblemization of certain medial virtues and capabilities of animals, serve to create, shift, erode and blur the anthropological difference (e.g., Schneider, 2007).

The study of cultural techniques, however, is not aimed at removing the anthropological difference between human and non-human animals by means of subtle deconstructivist refutations of the many attempts to distinguish between that ‘which calls itself human’ and that which is called ‘animal’. Its goal is not to grant rights to animals, or deprive humans of certain privileges. Nor is it bent on critiquing the dogma of pure ontological difference. Rather, it is concerned with decentring the distinction between human and non-human by insisting on the radical technicity of this distinction – something, incidentally, that Cary Wolfe and David Wills come close to in their recent exploration of ‘Animal Dasein’ and the deep-seated technicity of the human (Wills, 2008; Wolfe, 2012). Human and non-human animals are always already recursively intertwined because the irreducible multiplicity and historicity of the anthropological is always already processed by cultural techniques and media technologies. Ahab’s becoming-whale is not rooted in Herman Melville’s bioethics but in the cultural technique of whale hunting. Without this technologically oriented decentring there is the danger of confusing ethics with sentimentality: the human/animal difference remains caught in a mirror stage, and the humanity that is exorcized from humans is simply transferred on to animals which now appear as the better humans.

But what, then, were and are cultural techniques? Conceptually we may distinguish three phases. Ever since antiquity the European understanding of culture implies that it is technologically constituted. The very word ‘culture’, derived from the Latin *colere* and *cultura*, refers to the development and practical usage of means of cultivating and settling the soil with homesteads and cities. As an engineering term, *Kulturtechnik*, usually translated as agricultural or rural engineering, has been around since the late 19th century. As defined by the sixth edition of *Meyers Großes Konversationslexikon* (1904), cultural techniques comprise ‘all agricultural technical procedures informed by the engineering sciences that serve to improve soil conditions’, such as irrigation, drainage, enclosure and river regulation. To a certain extent the post (cold) war turn of German media theory builds on this tradition. The corrals, pens and enclosures that separate hunter from prey (and that in the course of co-evolutionary domestication accentuate the anthropological difference between humans and animals), the line the plough draws across the soil, and the calendar that informs sowing, harvesting and associated rituals, are all archaic cultural techniques of hominization, time and space. Thus the concept of cultural techniques clearly and unequivocally repudiates

the ontology of philosophical concepts. Humans *as such* do not exist independently of cultural techniques of hominization, time *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of time measurement, and space *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of spatial control. This does not mean that the theory of cultural techniques is anti-ontological; rather, it moves ontology into the domain of ontic operations. Similar ideas relating to the production of ontological distinctions by means of ontic cultural techniques are to be found in American post-humanities, for instance, with regard to houses and the cultural techniques of dwelling (e.g., Wills, 2008: 56). This discourse, however, remains tied to the level of philosophical universals. There is no such thing as *the* house, or the house as such, there are only historically and culturally contingent cultural techniques of shielding oneself off and processing the distinction between inside and outside. What (still) separates the theory of cultural techniques from those of the posthumanities, then, is that the former focuses on empirical historical objects while the latter prefer philosophical idealizations.

Starting in the 1970s, basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic were referred to as elementary *Kulturtechniken*; television and information and communications technology were added in the 1980s. What separates this particular usage of the term from its more recent application is that it still reveals a traditional middle-class understanding of culture that links culture to humanist educational imperatives. 'Culture' still serves to conjure up the sphere of art, good taste and education (*Bildung*) in a Goethean sense – in other words, culture is still seen as the repository of indispensable ingredients for the formation of a 'whole human'. With this background in mind, the reference to television or the internet as cultural techniques aims at subjecting these new media to the sovereignty of the book – as opposed to a more pop-cultural usage that challenged the monopoly of the *alphabétise* (Lacan) over our senses. By establishing a link with the older, technologically oriented understanding of culture, cultural techniques research breaks with the 19th-century middle-class tradition that conceived of culture exclusively in terms of the book reigning over all the other arts.

To be sure, within the new media-theoretical and culturalist context cultural techniques do refer to the so-called elementary cultural techniques, but they now also encompass the domains of *graphé* exceeding the alpha-numerical code. Operative forms of writing such as calculus, cards and catalogues, whose particular effectiveness rests on their intrinsic relationship to their material carrier (which serves to endow them with a certain degree of autonomy), are of considerable interest to those studying cultural techniques. By ascending to the status of a new media-theoretical and cultural studies paradigm, cultural techniques now also include means of time measurement, legal procedures, and the sacred. At the same time the concept of cultural techniques could

attain a systematic foundation in the context of palaeoanthropology, animal studies, the philosophy of technology, the anthropology of images, ethnology, fine arts, and the histories of science and law inasmuch as these disciplines became subject to the 'cultural turn' themselves.

In hindsight, the notion of cultural techniques was received – maybe all too willingly – by posthumanist cultural studies because it subverted the nonsensical war of succession between 'media' and 'culture' over the vacant throne of the transcendental by subjecting the two combatants to further investigation (Schüttpelz, 2006: 90). That is to say, *media* are scrutinized with a view toward their technicity, technology is scrutinized with a view toward its instrumental and anthropological determination, and culture is scrutinized with a view toward its boundaries, its other and its idealized notion of bourgeois *Bildung*. Against this background, and drawing upon the most recent discussions, we can add five further features that characterize the theoretical profile of cultural techniques.

(i) Essentially, cultural techniques are conceived as operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate:

Cultural techniques – such as writing, reading, painting, counting, making music – are always older than the concepts that are generated from them. People wrote long before they conceptualized writing or alphabets; millennia passed before pictures and statues gave rise to the concept of the image; and until today, people sing or make music without knowing anything about tones or musical notation systems. Counting, too, is older than the notion of numbers. To be sure, most cultures counted or performed certain mathematical operations; but they did not necessarily derive from this a concept of number. (Macho, 2003: 179)

However, operations such as counting or writing always presuppose technical objects capable of performing – and to a considerable extent, determining – these operations. As an historically given micro-network of technologies and techniques, cultural techniques are the exteriority and/or materiality of the signifier. An abacus allows for different calculations than ten fingers; a computer, in turn, allows for different calculations than an abacus. When we speak of cultural techniques, therefore, we envisage a more or less complex actor network that comprises technological objects as well as the operative chains they are part of and that configure or constitute them.

(ii) To speak of cultural techniques presupposes a notion of plural cultures. This is not only in deference to notions of multi-culturality, it also implies a posthumanist understanding of culture that no longer posits man as the exclusive subject of culture. To quote a beautiful formulation by Cornelia Vismann: 'If media theory were or had a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical

subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs' (2010: 171).² Objects are tied into practices in order to produce something that within a given culture is addressed as a 'person'. In accordance with Philippe Descola's (2013) different 'dispositives of being' (naturalism, animism, totemism, analogism), natural things, animals, images or technological objects may also appear as persons.

(iii) In order to differentiate cultural techniques from other technologies, Thomas Macho has argued that only those techniques should be labelled cultural techniques that involve symbolic work. 'Symbolic work requires specific cultural techniques, such as speaking, translating and understanding, forming and representing, calculating and measuring, writing and reading, singing and making music' (Macho, 2008: 99).³ Macho's suggestion is certainly very helpful when it comes to countering a detrimental inflation: nowadays planning, transparency, yoga, gaming, and even forgetting have been promoted to cultural techniques. What separates cultural techniques from all others is their potential self-reference or 'pragmatics of recursion':

From their very beginnings, speaking can be spoken about and communication be communicated. We can produce paintings that depict paintings or painters; films often feature other films. One can only calculate and measure with reference to calculation and measurement. And one can of course write about writing, sing about singing, and read about reading. On the other hand, it's impossible to thematize fire while making a fire, just as it is impossible to thematize field tilling while tilling a field, cooking while cooking, and hunting while hunting. We may talk about recipes or hunting practices, represent a fire in pictorial or dramatic form, or sketch a new building, but in order to do so we need to avail ourselves of the techniques of symbolic work, which is to say, we are not making a fire, hunting, cooking, or building at that very moment. Building on a phrase coming out of systems theory, we could say that cultural techniques are *second-order techniques*. (Macho, 2008: 100, emphasis in original)

It is no doubt very tempting to follow a proposal of such alluring simplicity, but unfortunately it suffers from an overly reductive notion of the symbolic in combination with a too static distinction between first- and second-order techniques. Granted, you cannot thematize the making of fire while making fire, but this certainly does not apply to cooking, at least not if you pay heed to Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analysis.

Cooking, a differentiated set of activities linked to food preparation, is both a technical procedure that brings about a transformation of the real and a symbolic act distinct from other possible acts. For instance, as part of the culinary triangle underlying the symbolic order of food

preparation, the act of boiling something means to neither roast nor smoke it (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: 478–490). Hence every instance of boiling, roasting or smoking is always already an act of communication because it communicates to both the inside and the outside that within a certain culture certain animals are boiled, roasted and smoked – like (or unlike) in other cultures, be they near or far. Because it is constituted by structural differences cooking does indeed thematize cooking in the act of cooking.

Furthermore, ploughing too can be a symbolic act. If, as ancient sources attest, ploughs were used to draw a sacred furrow to demarcate the limits of a new city, then this constitutes an act of writing in the sense of Greek *graphé*. To plough is in this case to engage in symbolic work because the *graphein* serves to mark the distinction between inside and outside, civilization and barbarism, an inside domain in which the law prevails and one outside in which it does not. Hence doors, as well, are a fundamental cultural technique, given that the operations of opening and closing them process and render visible the distinction between inside and outside. A door, then, is both material object and symbolic thing, a first- as well as a second-order technique. This, precisely, is the source of its distinctive power. The door is a machine by which humans are subjected to the law of the signifier. It makes a difference, Macho writes, whether you whittle and adorn an arrow or whether you shoot it at an animal (2011: 45). But does this not ontologize and universalize an occidental rationality that always already separates two different types of knowledge: culture on the one hand and technology on the other? What if the arrow can be used only after it has been ‘decorated’? What if said ‘decoration’ is part of the arrow’s technical make-up? Macho’s view of the symbolic still implies some kind of tool-making animal that employs media to perform symbolic work and thus appears as the master or ‘manipulator’ of the symbolic. As a result the analysis elides both those techniques that enable the symbolic to enter the real and the anthropo-techniques that generate the anthropological difference in the first place.

In short, it is problematic to base an understanding of cultural techniques on static concepts of technologies and symbolic work, that is, on an ontologically operating differentiation between first- and second-order techniques. Separating the two must be replaced by chains of operations and techniques. In order to situate cultural techniques *before* the grand epistemic distinction between culture and technology, sense and nonsense, code and thing, it is necessary to elaborate a *processual* (rather than ontological) definition of first- and second-order techniques. We need to focus on how recursive operative chains bring about a switch from first- to second-order techniques (and back), on how nonsense generates sense, how the symbolic is filtered out of the real or how, conversely, the symbolic is incorporated into the real, and how the material signifier is present in the signified and manages to create a physical presence effect.

Macho himself alludes to the possibility of such a processual definition by speaking of *potential* self-reference. One prime example is the art of weaving. If you adhere to the rigid distinction between first- and second-order techniques, weaving will not qualify as a cultural technique because it does not exhibit any self-referential qualities. The term only makes sense once a piece of tapestry depicts a piece of tapestry, or a garment appears on a garment. Yet the very technique, the ongoing combination of weave and pattern, always already produces an ornamental pattern that by virtue of its technical repetition refers to itself and therefore (according to Derrida) displays sign character (see Derrida, 1985). We may also distinguish Marcel Mauss's so-called 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1992) from cultural techniques, that is, from the different ways in which cultures make use of bodily activities such as swimming, running, giving birth (Maye, 2010: 135). On the other hand, the recursive chains of operation that constitute cultural techniques always already contain bodily techniques. According to Mauss, writing, reading and calculating, too, are techniques of the body (rather than exclusively mental techniques); they are the results of teaching docile bodies that today are in competition with the performance of interactive navigational instruments.

(iv) Every culture begins with the introduction of distinctions: inside/outside, pure/impure, sacred/profane, female/male, human/animal, speech/absence of speech, signal/noise, and so on. The chains that make up these distinctions are recursive, that is, any given distinction may be re-entered on either side of another distinction. Thus the inside/outside distinction can be introduced on the animal side of the human/animal distinction in order to produce the distinction between domestic and wild animals. Or the distinction sacred/profane can be introduced on the speech side of the speech/absence of speech distinction resulting in a split between sacred and profane languages. The constitutive force of these distinctions and recursions is the reason why the contingent culture in which we live is frequently taken to be the real, 'natural' order of things. Researching cultural techniques therefore also amounts to an epistemological engagement with the medial conditions of whatever lays claim to reality. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that the distinctions in question are processed by media in the broadest sense of the word (for instance, doors process the distinctions between inside/outside), which therefore cannot be restricted to one or the other side of the distinction. Rather, they assume the position of a mediating third preceding first and second (see Serres, 1982: 53). These media are basal cultural techniques.

In other words, the analysis of cultural techniques observes and describes techniques involved in operationalizing distinctions in the real. They generate the forms in the shape of perceptible unities of distinctions. Operating a door by closing and opening it allows us to

perform, observe, encode, address and ultimately wire the difference between inside and outside (see Siegert, 2012). Concrete actions serve to distinguish them from the preceding non-differentiatedness. In more general terms, all cultural techniques are based on the transition from non-distinction to distinction and back.

Yet we always have to bear in mind that the distinction between nature and culture itself is based on a contingent, culturally processed distinction. Cultural techniques precede the distinction of nature and culture. They initiate acculturation, yet their transgressive use may just as well lead to deculturalization; inevitably they partake in determining whether something belongs to the cultural domain or not. What Lévi-Strauss wrote about the art of cooking applies to all cultural techniques: '[T]he system demonstrates that the art of cooking [...] being situated between nature and culture, has as its function to ensure their articulation one with the other' (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: 489).

(v) Cultural techniques are not only media that sustain, disseminate, internalize and institutionalize sign systems, they also destabilize cultural codes, erase signs and deterritorialize sounds and images. As well as cultures of distinction we also have cultures of de-differentiation (what once was labelled 'savage' and placed in direct opposition to culture). Cultural techniques do not only colonize bodies. Tied to specific practices and chains of operation, they also serve to de-colonize bodies, images, text and music (see Holl, 2011). Media appear as code-generating or code-destroying interfaces between cultural orders and a real that cannot be symbolized. Resorting to a different terminology, we can refer to the nature/culture framework in terms of the real and the symbolic. By assuming the position of the third, an interface between the real and the symbolic, basal cultural techniques always already imply an unmarked space. By necessarily including the unmarked space that is excluded by the processed distinctions, cultural techniques always contain the possibility of liquidating the latter. In other words, cultural techniques always have to take account of what they exclude. For instance, upon closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that musical notational systems operate against a background of what elides representation and symbolization – the sounds and noise of the real. Any state-of-the-art account of cultural techniques – more precisely, any account mindful of the *technological* state of the art – must be based on an historically informed understanding of electric and electronic media as part of the technical and mathematical operationalization of the real. It will therefore by necessity have to include what under Old European conditions had been relegated to the other side of culture: the erasure of distinctions as well as the deterritorialization and disfiguration of representations – the fall of the signifier from the height of the symbolic to the depths of the real.

Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young.

Notes

1. This article is also the introductory essay in a volume on cultural techniques forthcoming from Fordham University Press.
2. The Vismann (2010) essay is part of this collection (see this issue).
3. The Macho (2008) essay is part of this collection (see this issue).

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