

The *KULTUR* of CULTURAL TECHNIQUES

Conceptual Inertia and the Parasitic Materialities
of Ontologization

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Abstract This article offers an introduction to the German concept of *Kulturtechniken* (cultural techniques), with a special focus on the term's multilayered semantic career, as well as on the way old notions of *Kultur* are at play in the concept.

Keywords cultural techniques; Friedrich Kittler; media theory; Bernhard Siegert

Ghosts of Concepts Past

Words strain and crack, the poet laments; they slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place. What poets deplore, theorists have come to exploit. Indeed, what has inspired the last five decades of theorizing more than our great awareness of the slipshod fickleness of speech? What are large portions of theory other than sophisticated parasites of linguistic vicissitude? Whether the latter is said to be an inherent structural property of language or caused by the fact that it is a social medium processed by billions of wayward tongues that keep adding and subtracting layers of meaning, the bottom line is that linguistic communication cannot arrive at any reliable truth capable of fully sustaining itself for more than three pages. Subject to deferral and slippage, language

is either inherently unstable or hopelessly promiscuous; in either case, it obstructs reliable signifying practices. All this is so well known and has filled so many debates, books, and careers that we tend to forget that the opposite is just as true. Words are stiff, obstinate, unyielding; they are slow to move and hard to change. Their recalcitrance is deeply rooted: words are frozen blocks of meaning with seven-eighths submerged in the past. This, too, theory exploits. The originality effect of many new proposals emerges from the confrontation between new conceptual enterprises and the ghosts of concepts past. Conceptual inertia is no less fertile a source of intellectual unrest than conceptual slippage.

Take the German word *Kultur*. For a long time *Kultur* was not *culture*. The words related to each other like English *gift* to German *Gift*. The former indicates a present, the latter is the German word for “poison”—cognates derived from the same stem and identical in many ways, but better not mistaken for each other. This conceptual divergence contributed its share to the bygone phony war between Frankfurt-style critical theory and Birmingham-bred cultural studies—a contest of mutual disregard designed to determine which party could ignore the other more studiously. But over the last twenty years, two developments have narrowed the divide. The first is the large-scale institutionalization of *Kulturwissenschaften* (never to be, translated as “cultural studies”) in the wake of German reunification. The emergence of *Kulturwissenschaften*, incidentally, owes a debt of gratitude to the defunct German Democratic Republic, since the stale hothouses of official Marxism often displayed a more expansive understanding of culture than their Western liberal

or neo-Marxist counterparts. The second factor is the German reception of the many -isms and -ologies, primarily of US origin, frolicking under the umbrella term *cultural studies*. The latter shows that, in matters of contemporary theory, Germany now tends to import more than it exports. Of course, there are notable exceptions to this trade imbalance: the rearguard actions of the last divisions of the Frankfurt School, or the growing interest in Peter Sloterdijk and Niklas Luhmann. And then there is the international reception of so-called German Media Theory, an observer construct primarily associated with the work of the late Friedrich Kittler. While the Kittler moment has peaked, we are now on the threshold of a second closely related import: the focus on *Kulturtechniken* or cultural techniques. But really, why bother? Yes, Kittler was interesting in a provocative, ornery way, but the simple fact that something appears in his wake is no reason why those with no special investment in the arcana of contemporary German theorizing should pay attention.

So indeed, why bother? In the grand scheme of things—that is, looking not at his work but at the role it came to play in anglophone debates (see Winthrop-Young 2011)—Kittler was an antidotal thinker. His contributions served to counterbalance long-held assumptions about the relationship between humans and media technologies. Granted, like Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, Kittler may have gone overboard, but this was inevitable given that, prior to his arrival, the boat was threatening to capsize on the other side. The concept of cultural techniques, while deployed far less polemically than the Kittlerian media absolutism of the 1980s and 1990s, promises a similarly productive counterbalance. As in the case of Kittler’s media theory, the remarkable

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connectivity is due to the fact that the German import is both very much like and unlike what is already being peddled on the anglophone market. We will encounter an intriguing mixture of known and unknown. For instance, readers familiar with North American ideas of posthumanism (which I shall briefly reference at the end) will come across many deceptively similar ideas. The emphasis on chains of operations and the linking of actors, artifacts, and techniques, in turn, will bring to mind basic concepts of actor-network-theory (ANT)—in fact, the German themselves have come to realize the possible points of connection (Engell and Siegert 2013). However, as we shall see, the differences are no less pronounced. And differences—differences of conceptual origin, impetus, and approach—are where we have to begin.

Careers of Kultur

Kulturtechniken are difficult to define. The term entered the German language on three different occasions, each time with a new meaning (see Winthrop-Young 2013; Geoghegan 2013). Unfortunately, all three meanings are still in use, and many scholars are not clear on which particular meaning they have in mind when they brandish the term. To top it off, some of the more sophisticated and combative theorists (in a German context, these attributes tend to be synonymous) are prone to play off the various meanings against one another. Defining *Kulturtechniken* therefore requires that we engage in a bit of archaeological work. In order to grasp how the term's three layers interact with each and thereby redraw the boundary between *Kultur* and *Technik*, we will need to go back in time to the old days when German *Kultur* was something very distinct. But as already indicated, old notions of words like *Kultur* did not simply vanish; they are

still at work and push compounds like *Kulturtechnik*, *Kulturwissenschaften*, or *Kulturindustrie* (culture industry) in certain directions. (Think of this in Newtonian terms: a concept in motion remains a concept in motion unless acted upon by another, stronger concept.) Readers should be warned, however, that in the course of this excavation we will be forced to traverse well-trodden grounds and recycle a couple of Anglo-German clichés that are old enough to have turned into myths. Hopefully, Elias Canetti got it right when he described myths as something so old they are no longer boring.

Let us start with culture at its finest. One of the hallowed landmarks of British television was the 1969 broadcast of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*, a guided tour of Western art and architecture conducted at such high altitudes that only the most elevated names came into sight: Dürer to Delacroix, Rembrandt to Rodin, Brunelleschi to Brunel. *Civilisation* was a success. It resulted in a peerage for Clark, revenue for the BBC, and charges of Western Eurocentrism for both. The latter were triggered by Clark's implicit assurance that little of cultural significance ever happened east of the Oder, and next to nothing outside of Europe. The 1970 German translation of Clark's accompanying book captured this bias in all its pomp and circumstance: *Glorie des Abendlandes* (*Glory of the Occident*). Somebody must have had second thoughts because, by the time the documentary aired in Germany in 1977, its title has been downgraded to *Zivilisation*—*Die Kultur des Abendlandes* (*Civilisation—The Culture of the Occident*).

Zivilisation-Kultur: Rarely has a simple dash been under such duress. On the one hand, it is supposed to double itself into an equation sign and signal the identity of *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*. On the other

hand, it is pressured to adopt an upright position and turn into a slash to indicate that *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* are alternates, if not downright opposites. Since we are dealing with Germany, the latter seems more likely. Even before it emerged as a political entity—many would say: precisely because it had not yet assumed political shape—Germany pursued the *Kultur-Zivilisation* distinction with particular rigor. The sociogenesis of this antithesis has been told many times (and nowhere better than in the opening chapter of Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*): the fragmented, hamstrung German middle class compensated for its political impotence by developing a reservoir of moral and cultural depth aimed at the ritualized civility of the ruling petty nobility. Since the conduct of the latter was in large part inspired by the French courtly aristocracy, the stage was set for a historically fateful recoding. The horizontal distinction between middle-class *Kultur* and upper-class *civilité* morphed into the vertical distinction between deep German *Kultur* and superficial French (and subsequently British and US) civilization. "From a primarily social it becomes a primarily national antithesis" (Elias 1982: 31). Another dramatically very effective maneuver is to arrange the binary on a temporal axis. In Oswald Spengler's world, *Zivilisation* comes after *Kultur*. The blooming creativity of a culture's early stage gradually morphs into late-imperial decrepitude—which is where we are now.

The main difference between English and German, then, has less to do with the content of the terms than their relationship. In English, culture and civilization tend be more coextensive; German *Kultur*, however, was a term designed to cordon off a more refined domain of human activity. No matter how useful, the items of *Zivilisation* are of second rank, "comprising

only the outer appearance of human beings, the surface of human existence," while *Kultur* "refers essentially to intellectual, artistic and religious facts, and has a tendency to draw a sharp dividing line between facts of this sort, on the one side, and political, economic and social facts on the other" (Elias 1982: 4). The BBC's *Civilisation* depicted what in traditional German discursive practices is known as *Kultur*. Even in the late 1970s, it would have been misleading to translate it as *Zivilisation*. Innocent German viewers might have mistaken Lord Clark for a mere sociologist.

At the same time, *Kultur* experienced alternate semantic careers. Of course, this also applies to other languages. In both English and German, we speak of bacterial cultures, and it is understood that they are as far removed from Clark's world of pillars and paintings as a Petri dish is from Saint Peter's Basilica (though the most recent advances in biocultural theory are narrowing that gap, too). Or take the German compound *Kulturwald*. It literally translates as "culture-wood" and may conjure up rows of neatly trimmed goose-stepping conifers reciting Goethe. Unfortunately, reality never lives up to Monty Python scenarios. As opposed to a natural-growth *Naturwald*, a *Kulturwald* is quite simply a cultivated forest professionally pruned and nurtured by human hands, frequently with a view toward sustainable exploitation and recreational purposes. Here, *Kultur* is a matter of timber and hiking; it relates to silviculture and has nothing to do with lofty notions of art and literature. Goethe wrote many poems about oaks and pines, and we have felled many of them to classify their literary treatment, but any attempt to categorize the trees themselves as romantic or symbolist would be as ridiculous as trying to figure out whether Goethe was deciduous or coniferous.

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But matters are not that simple, especially in a German context, for here we encounter a notorious instance of the dialectics of conceptual contagion. If the forest is coded in terms of culture, and if this coding takes place within a discursive habitat that invests culture with emphatic notions of truth, depth, and identity, then the stage is set for a nefarious conceptual transfer. If the forest is associated, however superficially, with *Kultur*, then that which threatens the forest will also be seen as threat to the essence and identity of culture. The exclusivity of capital-*K Kultur* exerts a gravitational semantic pull on its noncultural other. The pest, or *Schädling*, becomes a *Kulturschädling*, a “culture-pest.” In turn, the entomologist propagating the use of insecticide takes on the trappings of a culture warrior (see Jansen 2003 for a detailed study). We know what follows: if, as a result of their anticultural arboreal destructiveness, insects ascend into the cultural domain, then those humans classified as destroyers of culture descend to an insect level. The use of an insecticide to exterminate human vermin is anything but a random choice. To be sure, this is an extreme example, but it is necessary to keep discursive undercurrents, semantic inertia, and conceptual cross-contaminations in mind when tackling the compound *Kulturtechnik*.

Mozart, Manure, and MTV

Let us take shovels to words and excavate the conceptual layers. While it is difficult to pinpoint when the term *Kulturtechniken* was first used, it is possible—in a Kittlerian spirit of showcasing names, dates, institutions, and, above all, engineers—to note when and where exactly it emerged as an academic discipline. In 1876, Friedrich Wilhelm Dünkelberg (1819–1912), the

“Father of Cultural Techniques” (Kastanek 1995: 37), introduced the first course in what was called *Kulturtechniken [sic]* at the Royal Prussian Agricultural Academy in Poppelsdorf/Bonn. At this point in time, the term refers to the irrigation and draining of arable tracts of land, the straightening of riverbeds, the construction of water reservoirs, and other forms of land improvement. In this particular context, *Kulturtechnik* is usually translated as “rural” or “environmental engineering.” We may note in passing that the tension in the compound has its counterpart in the hybrid nature of its curricular inception. The initial agenda was to link the hitherto separate domains of geodesy, engineering, and amelioration, in order to respond to the need for increased agricultural output in a newly united, rapidly industrializing Germany. While neither the engineers engaged in constructing bridges, canals, and water reservoirs nor the surveyors responsible for mapping, consolidating, and apportioning tracts of land possessed much knowledge of agriculturally optimal land and water utilization, agricultural practitioners tended to lack geodesic and engineering expertise. Dünkelberg’s goal was to bridge the gap by training *Kulturingenieure*, or “culture engineers” (a now rarely used term that has acquired a faint Stalinist whiff) able to master and integrate these diverse skills. Various distinct practices, then, are lumped together in a new postsecondary discipline. Evidently, this particular instantiation of *Kulturtechnik* highlights *Kultur*’s etymological origin in Latin *cultura*, derived from *colere* (tend, guard, cultivate, till). Culture is, in the first instance, agriculture. But agriculture—to anticipate the concluding section—is initially not a matter of sowing and reaping, planting and harvesting, but of mapping and zoning, of determining a piece of

arable land to be cordoned off by a boundary that will give rise to the distinction between the cultivated land and its natural other.

This particular meaning remains very much in use. The *Zeitschrift für Kulturtechnik und Flurbereinigung* is the *Journal of Rural Engineering and Development*, and the University of Bonn's Institut für Städtebau, Bodenordnung und Kulturtechnik (heir to Dünkelberg's pioneering efforts) bills itself in English as the Institute for Urban Planning, Zoning and Environmental Engineering. Occasional double entendres may arise. When Germans speak of *verbesserte Kulturbedingungen*—literally, “improved culture conditions”—they most likely have in mind the fortunate circumstance that due to improved sociocultural conditions more people are willing and able to enjoy Mozart. Yet they may also be referring to the no-less-fortunate circumstance that, due to improved fertilizers, those people are digesting superior agricultural products while enjoying *Così fan tutte*. As Friedrich Nietzsche, greatest of all gastrically sensitive cultural theorists, liked to emphasize, a healthy culture presupposes healthy bowels.

In the 1970s, the term acquired a second meaning related to the skills and aptitudes involved in the use of modern media. Watching television, for instance, not only requires specific technological know-how but also an equally medium-specific set of mental and conceptual skills, such as understanding audiovisual referentiality structures, assessing the fictionality status of different programs, interacting with media-specific narrative formats, or the ability to differentiate between intended and unintended messages. All these skills are part of the *Kulturtechniken des Fernsehens*, the “cultural techniques of television.” (And to do justice to Kenneth Clark

and the BBC: regardless of its cultural content, *Civilisation*, with its pioneering use of commentary, music, and location shots, contributed its share to the cultural technique of the documentary, which, in turn, necessitated a learning process on the part of the audience.)

This new meaning had more to do with MTV than with Mozart and manure. Its emergence indicated recognition of the fact that the diffusion of mass media into the smallest capillaries of society demanded new approaches and methods of investigation. Endless discussions of how media were used to manipulate the masses, or could be used to liberate them (the grand media narratives of the 1950s and the 1960s, respectively), gave way to a focus on more localized interactions between users and media technology. On this level, we can see correspondences between the emergence of *Kulturtechniken* and the new focus on media in anglophone cultural studies. But the differences are no less obvious. Many German media scholars were less willing than their British or US counterparts to download the manipulation and liberation paradigms of bygone theory decades from the macro- to the micro-level of media analysis. There are several reasons for this divergence, not the least of which is the degree to which collective experiences, past and present, shape intellectual tendencies. Modern Britain, an ethnically more diverse post-imperial social patchwork that nonetheless (or because of it) retains protocols of class distinction unthinkable in Germany, lends itself more easily to analytical procedures concerned with the media-based identity formation or destruction of particular groups (see Winthrop-Young 2006). The overall German experience is different: from the early harnessing of literature as a means of inscribing a collective German

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identity in the early 1800s to the propaganda excesses of the Nazis, the historical heritage biases observers to view media in terms of homogenization rather than differentiation—not to mention the way in which political and military catastrophes contributed to the removal of traditional elites. Felix Britannia has yet to reap the egalitarian effects of dictatorships and lost wars.

More importantly, Kittlerian media theory strongly resisted the conventional—if not Pavlovian—identification of media with *mass media*. Kittler himself did not write much (or well) on television, and he all but ignored social media. To clarify matters, it may be helpful to briefly compare the German approach to that of Marshall McLuhan. Like McLuhan, Kittler and his ilk preferred an expansive, almost inflationary, use of the all-purpose moniker *media*. It was a dragnet term deployed with minimal definition to spearhead an attack on reigning approaches to the left and right that neglected the means of communication in favor of the content and the social effect of the messages communicated. The so-called German and Canadian media theories responded by stressing the materialities rather than the hermeneutics of communication. But in contrast to McLuhan's anthropocentrism, theorists like Kittler refused to view media as extensions of human faculties (to the point of misrepresenting McLuhan's arguments). On the contrary, the routines and operations of the human psychic apparatus were seen as modeled on—and developing in feedback with—media technologies. And it certainly wasn't the goal of media theory to probe how these extensions affected human sense ratios. Instead, it was deemed necessary to first study the internal operations and evolution of technology before addressing the secondary question of how

media affected senses and society. Media, in short, were neither prostheses nor tools, and what they did to humans was not the main issue.

It is crucial to pinpoint the three closely related ambiguities at work here, since they are also at work in the third, theoretically most sophisticated, meaning of cultural techniques:

- (i) Media are extracted from their social dimension (e.g., ownership, manipulation effects, emancipatory potential) to achieve a focus on the specific materialities of storage and communication technologies. This apparent technological focus is, in part, offset by considerably broadening the media under investigation.
- (ii) While the technologization gestures toward a more factual definition of media, it is accompanied by a noticeable reluctance to define the key term *media*.
- (iii) The two points above are best explained by the fact that German Media Theory never saw itself only as a theory of media—that is, as a current of thought eager to turn media into new objects of investigation. It viewed itself more as an enterprise eager to scrutinize established objects (including history, consciousness, society, the human) from the point of view of media (see Siegert 2013: 50). Media are not only alternate objects of scholarly inquiry; they also provide the basis for alternate scholarly narratives.

Reading, Walking, Cooking

The conceptual expansion of cultural techniques mimicked that of media. Within a fairly short time, *Kulturtechniken*, initially linked to mass media, came to include

basic skills like reading, writing, or counting, now referred to as *elementare Kultur-techniken* (elementary cultural techniques). Once again, it is important to capture the underlying ambivalence.

Take Walter Ong's classic *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. The subtitle suggests that the processing of language in pretypographic times was, somehow, a less technological, and thus more "natural," affair. One of the lasting achievements of Kittler was to unravel the discursive, administrative, educational, and *technical* labor that went into "naturalizing" the processing of language in allegedly pretechnical times. Kittler accomplished this because the achievements of Thomas Edison and Alan Turing taught him to view cultures as large data-processing machines. The engagement with ostensibly more technical media thus revealed the technological status of their allegedly less technical predecessors. To conceptualize reading and writing as elementary cultural techniques is to emphasize that technology is no less involved in unrolling a scroll or holding a goose quill than in clicking hyperlinks or cutting and pasting a term paper. There is never a document of culture that is not also a document of technology.

The expansion of the concept is reinforced by the fact that these elementary techniques are linked to bodies. Learning to write requires years of physical drill involving posture, grip, and all the tortures of calligraphic training. The same applies to modern reading habits. We are programmed to screen out our bodies as a medium of literary experience, yet precisely this immobilization results in a cognitive gain and the mental agility to instantaneously jump between the most diverse texts. In short, cultural techniques include what Marcel Mauss termed

techniques du corps. Indeed, Mauss's famous 1934 lecture on body techniques is indispensable for the understanding of cultural techniques (see Schüttpelz 2010). After briefly addressing swimming, marching, and trench-digging (the initial focus on athletic and military activities is no coincidence), Mauss provides a more peaceful but no less revealing example:

I was ill in New York. I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. . . . At last I realised that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they too were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to the cinema. This was an idea I could generalise. (Mauss 1973: 72)

The essence of this generalization is not to redraw the boundary between nature and culture in favor of the latter but to redefine it as a zone of constant exchange that has no predetermined location. Walking is not just a matter of physiology, gravity, and kinetics; it involves chains of operations that link ambulatory abilities to cultural protocols. It is not just a species marker or biological given; it is always already the interaction between the fact that you can walk and the expectation that you could or should walk in particular ways. But then again, all this is linked to a specific (cinematographic) device capable of "breaking the actions of the human body down into series of discrete serial movements" (Geoghegan 2013: 71). As we shall see, by turning walking and other body techniques into a sequence of technological and cultural operations that appear to blend into a "natural" action, Mauss's analysis of body techniques prefigures the core point of cultural techniques.

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This second meaning of cultural techniques contains a conservative gesture. While it retrojects technological awareness into the past, it also projects old humanist notions of culture into the future. If the first nineteenth-century use of term can be seen as an attempt to raise the agricultural domain into the world of *Kultur*, the second, mass media–inspired meaning amounts to an attempt to contain within the traditional paradigm of *Kultur* technologies frequently decried as postcultural or anticultural. Postprint media including television are reined in; they are literally and metaphorically cultivated to the status of books. Bluntly put, *Kulturtechnik* is an auto-vampiric term parasitically feeding off its own conceptual inertia. Its critical impact requires the ongoing tension produced by the very culture–technology divide it claims to overcome. In this respect, some practitioners of cultural techniques resemble their most high-profile whipping boys, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. The Frankfurt duo was far too subtle not to recognize the alienating commodification that was part and parcel of the reified notions of high culture, yet—just as in the case of *Kulturtechnik*—the critical purchase of their own neologism *Kulturindustrie* (culture industry) relied on the conceptual inertia of capital-*K Kultur*.

At this point, we have crossed the threshold to the third, and theoretically most sophisticated, meaning of cultural techniques. The best point of entry is a now canonical quote by Thomas Macho:

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)

Again, note the expansion. It is so sweeping that readers may well ask: What is *not* a cultural technique? What is the difference between cultural techniques and techniques or technologies in the most general sense of the word? Macho tried to contain the genie by restricting the term to symbolic techniques such as writing, reading, or painting that allow for self-referential recursions. Writing enables one to write about writing; painting itself can be depicted in paintings; films may feature other films. In other words, cultural techniques are defined by their ability to thematize themselves; they are second-order techniques as opposed to first-order techniques like cooking or tilling a field. In addition, the recursive, self-observing qualities of cultural techniques make them a “technology of the self” and thus render them indispensable for the generation, repetition, and maintenance of identity (see Macho 2013).

Bernhard Siegert, arguably the leading theorist in the field, responded by pointing out that the distinction between first- and second-order technique is not that clear (Siegert 2013: 59; see also Schüttpezel 2006: 87–90). Take cooking, for instance. Yes, its self-thematizing potential seems limited. How do you cook about cooking? But matters change once you follow the lead of Claude Lévi-Strauss and insert different cooking techniques (e.g., boiling, frying, smoking) into a meaning-generating structural set and accept the premise that the art of cooking “is situated between

nature and culture [and] has as its function to ensure their articulation one with the other" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 489). Cooking is a material as well as a symbolic technique that serves to differentiate different cultural or tribal domains. More importantly, it is a threshold operation that processes the exchanges between the natural and cultural terrains on display in the titles of Lévi-Strauss's first two *Mythologies* volumes, *Le cru et le cuit (The Raw and the Cooked)* and *Du miel aux cendres (From Honey to Ashes)*. And here we have arrived at the conceptual center of the third, theoretically most sophisticated, meaning of cultural techniques.

Practices of the Parasite; or, How Humans Emerged from Doors

Have another look at the Macho quote above. It highlights a sleight of hand that determines much of our knowledge production. People have been *counting* since time immemorial; in time, the notion of *number* arose; and, ever since, we have relied on the latter to understand the former. Rephrased on an ungainly abstract level: cultural techniques are preconceptual operations that generate the very concepts that subsequently are used to conceptualize these operations. Emergent phenomena turn into their own foundational properties. That is a remarkable achievement. It takes quite a chicken to lay the egg it hatched from.

But the deconstructive thrust of the third meaning of *Kulturtechnik* is not only that cultural techniques generate the concepts by which they are subsequently overshadowed (and that, therefore, have to be teased out by careful analysis). They are also involved in the conceptualization and ontologization of the domains they connect and of the identity of their users. Let us enter this complex terrain by way

of Siegert's most accessible example: doors.

Philosophers and poets (who with the exception of the ambulatory Nietzsche tend to be sedentary creatures) do not talk much about doors, and when they do, their opinions differ. Writing in his American exile, Adorno saw intimations of fascism in the brusque slamming required by modern car and refrigerator doors (Adorno 1997: 40). At almost the same time, Francis Ponge meditated more positively on "The Pleasure of the Door" with its "tight but well-oiled spring," by claiming that the act of "closing it decisively and shutting oneself in" is, somehow, a fundamentally egalitarian and empowering experience: "Kings do not touch doors" (Ponge 1972: 38). Both evaluations—doors as fascist and doors as democratic—are anthropocentric: a door is quintessentially something humans use (Ponge) or that has come to abuse them (Adorno). Both take as a given that which doors are said to either destroy (Adorno) or uphold (Ponge): the culture and/or agency of the humans engaged in opening and closing them. Moreover, both assessments appear to imply that doors function to connect pre-existing spaces—an inside and an outside. Taking issue with these assumptions, Siegert retrieves and modifies an argument deployed in Georg Simmel's beautiful essay "Bridge and Door." Not unlike the ways in which cooking both merges and severs the domains of nature and culture it brings out into the open, doors create that which they then both connect and separate. "Because the door forms, as it were, a linkage between the space of human beings and everything that remains outside it, it transcends the separation between the inner and the outer" (Simmel 1994: 7). Doors, then, belong to neither one side nor the other; they are of a third order.

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At this point, some German theorists invoke the fertile concept of the parasite as developed by Michel Serres (e.g., Schüttpelz 2006; Siegert 2007). In order to understand what is at stake, it is necessary to recall that one of Serres's basic moves was to invert the traditional chrono-conceptual order of the parasite. We tend to think of the parasite as something that comes to prey on already existing structures—like pirates congregating on busy shipping lanes. The sequence is clear: first the highway, then the highwaymen; first the digestive tract, then the tapeworm; first the communication, then the noise or *bruit parasite*. Serres turned matters around. The structures, as well as that which they connect, do not precede a “parasitical” third party. Rather, the latter is always already around and thus an indispensable, coconstitutive part of the former. Forest and favelas are already inhabited; but now, in a bid to extend its reach, some agent or central authority imposes structures designed to withstand and curb those that, as result of these discriminating incursions, emerge as clearly identified sources of irritation. Any act of communication is an act of excluding a “noisy” third party that thereby both is and is not part of the communication. One of the most interesting moves executed by theorists like Siegert and Erhard Schüttpelz—and one that, not surprisingly, arose when seasoned practitioners looked back at the hardware-obsessed extravaganzas of Kittlerian theory—is to reconceptualize media as Serresian parasites. In essence, Serres subordinated the sender-receiver relationship to that between communication and noise. (You could paraphrase it as a shift from Shannon's linear communication model to McLuhan's focus on the figure/ground relationship.) This communication/noise boundary, however, is a very fluid, if not fractal, dividing line that fundamentally

depends on the ways in which various media distinguish or filter out order from disorder. With this in mind (and invoking the Lacanian distinction that had been of such great importance to the younger Kittler), Siegert redescribes media “as code-generating interfaces between the real that cannot be symbolized and cultural orders” (2007: 33).

The implications are vast and reach from the cultural into the anthropological, if not anthropogenic, domain. As mentioned at the outset, outside observers will note that the German cultural techniques approach spawned by the Kittler effect is moving toward an intellectual domain that, especially in the United States, has been approached from a very different angle—namely, from a “posthumanist” mixture of deconstruction, postcybernetics, and critical animal studies (most notably, in the work of Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, David Wills, and Cary Wolfe). The similarities are obvious. Siegert and Wolfe, for instance, would agree that our “awakening” from the “anthropological slumber” calls for a “posthumanism able to deconstruct humanism as an occidental transcendental system of meaning production” (Siegert 2013: 53). Siegert and Wills, in turn, would agree that the core posthuman(ist) point is not the increasing hybridization of preexisting man into machine but an attention toward the fact that “the human was always already intermixed with the nonhuman” (53). Doors open up this way of thinking, for once you move from doors, gates, and portals to fences, pens, and corrals—that is, once you consider elementary cultural techniques of creating enclosed spaces for catching, keeping, and breeding animals—you are creating operative thresholds that effectively bring about the different species confronting each other across that divide. If there ever was

an *ur*-cultural technique, it was that of species differentiation. Humans did not come about on their own. As mendacious as we may be, we are not a Münchhausen species able to pull ourselves out of our pre-hominid swamp by our own hair. Instead we emerged, quite literally, from doors and gates, while domesticated animals—in opposition to which we were able to define ourselves—emerged on the other side: “Thus the difference between human beings and animals is one that could not be thought without the mediation of a cultural technique. In this not only tools and weapons . . . play an essential role; so, too, does the invention of the door, whose first form was presumably the gate [*Gatter*]. . . . The door appears much more as a medium of coevolutionary domestication of animals and human beings” (Siegert 2012: 8). This is the core of the third meaning of cultural techniques: on this layer, the term refers to operations that coalesce into entities that are subsequently viewed as the agents or sources running these operations. The similarities to the ANT approach (as well as to the work of Bruno Latour) are obvious: procedural chains and connecting techniques give rise to notions and objects that are then endowed with essentialized identities. Underneath our ontological distinctions are constitutive, media-dependent ontic operations that need to be teased out by means of a deconstructive maneuver able to disentangle acts, series, techniques, and technologies. As Siegert writes: “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”

(Siegert 2013: 56–57; emphasis in original). To rephrase it in a more philosophical vein (and at the risk of conjuring up a name that frequently induces flight behavior): the study of cultural techniques continues, in a technologically more informed fashion, a philosophical line of ontic-ontological questioning opened up by Martin Heidegger. If German media theory in the Kittlerian vein focused on the materialities of communication, the study of cultural techniques takes aim at the materialities of ontologization. If Kittlerian media theory stood for the switch from materialism to materialities, the study of cultural techniques reworks and extends the deconstruction of symbolic constructs into signifying practices in such a way that it now includes the deconstruction of cultural, material, and—who knows?—biological constructs into operating chains composed of practices, techniques, technologies proper, and linked actors. Hence the reach of the approach extends far beyond cultural studies or *Kulturwissenschaften*. Its self-assurance arises from the knowledge that it is, paradoxically, safely perched on the constantly shifting ground of operations and chains of actions. Like bygone theories that exploited the fickleness of language, the cultural-techniques approach depends on the fickleness of parasitical cultural baseline operations. There, it will be protected from being pinned down and dismantled like the many concepts it takes aim at. At least for a while.

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