

The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service

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Abstract

Focusing on a subject the author has extensively engaged with over the years (most notably in his 2010 study *Der Diener*), the article develops the notion of service as a cultural technique, and the media-theoretical figure of the servant as its servomechanism. The analysis follows three distinct scenarios that highlight, via different channels of perception (acoustic, optic and haptic), the interplay between corporeal practices and media objects in the production of specific cultural effects. In each of the examples chosen, service implies highly regulated networks of recursive operational chains that regulate in their turn the production and distribution of power and knowledge. Thus, Krajewski argues, despite, or rather, precisely because of their apparent marginality and invisibility, the ‘small gestures’ of service join the ranks of already established, elementary symbolic techniques such as reading or writing.

Keywords

cultural techniques, information technology, recursion, servants, servomechanisms

What would high culture be without literature? What would a society look like without mathematics and music? Can there be cultural progress without services? Without question, *reading* and *writing* produce cultural effects just like *calculating* and *music-making* do. But *service*? If cultural techniques are designed to carry out an action that develops cultural efficacy in a specific way through the interplay of purposeful bodily gestures and the use of aids such as tools, instruments or other medial objects, then service undoubtedly belongs to this category. However, while it is immediately evident in the case of writing how this elementary

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cultural technique of precisely applied finger and hand movements works in cooperation with a writing utensil (pencil, typewriter, fountain pen, etc.), the interaction in more varied processes such as service remains in need of explanation.

By way of three exemplary scenarios which will be briefly outlined, the cultural technique of service will be explained and subsequently situated within a broader context of cultural productivity and its effects. The history of service is extraordinarily diverse, complex and nearly boundless. As the subordinate's service of his master is based on one of the fundamental social relations between lord and servant, this cultural technique pervades the entirety of history, in time and space, from the earliest records to the present day, and not merely in today's form of Portuguese cleaning women in the industrial nations, but rather extending to the most remote human populations in the Amazon. That being said, the three scenarios all arise from a courtly context and cast their own respective spotlights on the acoustics (*A Courtly Cough*), the optics (*Signals in Sight*), and the haptics (*Regulating Rooms*) of service. In this way, each will bring a channel of perception into focus on to which the servant grafts himself, in the sense of a servomechanism, in order to perform his prescribed actions in careful observation. 'By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms' (McLuhan, 1964: 46). Just as the clerk is a underling to his clock, and the Native American to his canoe, according to McLuhan, the servant appears literally as the service mechanism of his respective technique, which manifests itself in the form of the dinner tray, the door to be attended, the message to be relayed (by way of a flag signal, for instance) or through another technical gesture. In the discussion of these scenarios, more fundamental questions will be touched upon in passing, so to speak; namely, what exactly is meant by a cultural technique? Erhard Schüttpelz provides a brilliant analysis of the concept (2006: 88). But first, it is necessary to see the servant in action.

A Courtly Cough

There has long existed a sophisticated communications system at court. Not simply in the optical realm, where the various positions of the courtiers are made recognizable through finely differentiated practices of signification in the form of uniforms, liveries and badges of all kinds (honour key, marshal's baton, etc.), but also in the acoustic realm, the various people are accompanied by corresponding signals that ensure the desired attention. Subaltern communications and their associated actions begin, ... ahem ... , with a cough.

To descend a few more levels, old senior footmen, meal attendants and valets know how to nuance their coughing perfectly. The

footman who closes the carriage's door clears his throat delicately when a lady-in-waiting who is deep in thought doesn't specify where she wants to go, after which he jumps on the back and often directs the coachman with loud coughing.

The valet in the master's chamber looks at the clock, coughing when a certain hour has arrived, and wakes the porter from his reverie with a loud cough, who almost forgot to have the coach brought around.

Finally, at the table, the court quartermaster directs the entire dinner with an extravagance of the finest and softest coughs, the attendant calls the footman's attention to his foolishness in the same way with expressive coughs, a broken plate or an empty glass, and a young servant recoils with a start and coughs gently before the terrible abyss into which he nearly fell, as he was prepared to present the first chamberlain with a wild pig's head from the right side. (Hackländer, [1854] 1875: 176)

In these scenarios, the servants carry out a variety of instructions and activities, most in direct relation to a technical object like a clock, a coach, a door or a (broken) plate. Sometimes, however, their action takes place without an additional object, as when their task is simply that of waiting for instructions. While all of these actions already contribute to a modest degree to the genesis of a cultural action, for instance through compliance with a courtly code of obedience and rule enforcement, on another more abstract level, they also bear witness to a core characteristic of cultural techniques, namely 'that the same operation is applied to results of the operation' (Schüttpelz, 2006: 95). On the one hand, this means that the respective activities of door service, housekeeping, and chauffeuring arise as an effect of a cough and thus as a result of a subtly expressed instruction from a superior. Instruction reacts to service. On the other hand, this constellation shows that a servant, as executor of this cultural technique, does not act merely in relation to a supreme master but is always integrated into a hierarchically established operational chain of immediately superior servants, who simultaneously act as his surrogate masters, just as he himself can act as advisor to inferior servants. The interweaving of service in recursive patterns proves to be an important criterion of a cultural technique.

Courtly coughing already suggests symptomatically that an act of service rarely stands alone, but instead remains engaged in a recursive network of services which relate to services. Every such action connects with subsequent communications in the form of arriving lordships or plates being served incorrectly (the right, instead of correctly the left side). The

coughing itself fulfils a primarily phatic function, in that it announces or initiates the occurrence of something else. But a signal can also elicit similar signals, like a cough continually passed onward, even over long distances. The second scenario shows such a linking of small gestures.

Signals in Sight

Sometime in 1835, the viceroy of Dahomey ran out of resources. However, Don Francisco Manoel da Silva, called Cobra Verde, didn't lack money or goods. Instead, he lacked ships, needed to transport the many slaves that he hoarded in his fort on the West African coast to Brazil. In his predicament, da Silva 'telegraphed' his blood brother Prince Kankpé in Abomey, in the interior of the country, to obtain his support. Werner Herzog's not particularly realistic 1987 film *Cobra Verde*, based on the novel by Bruce Chatwin, with Klaus Kinski in the lead role, re-enacts this scene in a remarkable way.

One scene shows a young slave in a traditional get-up (bamboo skirt), who is on standby, initially in a kind of break-dance – the film appeared in 1987 – awaiting a signal in consultation with a technical medium, the white signal flag, to then set his own signal in motion. In Figure 2, the small man is still in standby mode, while outside, behind the battlement, the chain of messengers waits at attention to carry the signal forth. The command is finally given after the people in uniforms convince themselves that the chain is intact: the messenger raises up and waves his flag, after which the nearest messenger likewise waves his flag, after which the nearest messenger likewise waves his flag, after which . . .

The spectators then sees how the signal comes from below, following the coastline, spreading toward the horizon. The sign traverses the messenger chain like a transverse wave, whereby the signal presumably encompasses more than a single prolooooooonged sign. Rather, the messengers do not simply wave once; instead, they seem to use a whole set of signals through different flag positions, like the French dial telegraph invented a few years before by the Chappe brothers under Napoleon. The individual messengers or slaves, respectively, stand shoulder to shoulder, their faces directed toward the sea with its own waves, in order to keep the actions of both of their neighbours to either side in view. This messenger chain is duplicated by a second, more loosely staggered sequence seen to the right of the image. These are the servants who control the servants, armed with a rifle and with a handful of slaves in view, watching over the proper transmission of the communication.

The message to be sent seems to get quite long; or at least the entire messenger chain wags its flags eagerly from the foreground of the image across the savannah to the horizon, while the guards crouch in the grass, considerably more relaxed in their supervisory task. After roughly

three hours, as predicted by da Silva, the answer comes from Abomey, approximately 100 km away as the crow flies, indeed in the same form, only in reverse order. Tightly packed, the individual messengers stand and wave their flags again, until the small slave behind the battlement receives the signal and waves affirmatively. Meanwhile, the servant dressed like a footman in a red uniform decodes the message for da Silva: 'The King sends his brother the great leopard's greeting.' End of message. Even if the content of the message – a brief leopard's greeting rather than assurance of a few ships – may have been cause for irritation for da Silva, the transmission of the message seems to work smoothly.

Apart from its (perhaps involuntary) comedy, this scene illustrates at least three fundamental aspects of a cultural technique. First, and quite conspicuously in its beginning with the flag-break-dance of the young slave, it demonstrates how strongly dependent a cultural technique is on a fusion of bodily techniques and technical media. Without artefacts, whether they be tools, instruments, technical or even human media in a clearly subservient function, no cultural technical action could come about (Maye, 2010: 135). And conversely, every technical medium necessitates a servant as *servomechanism*. No directed canoe journey without Native Americans, no regulated progress without clerks who ensure the operation of the clock, no culture without servants and their functions. Thus, cultural techniques like the data transmission undertaken here by the servants function exclusively in the context of a hybrid arrangement or collective of bodily techniques and media utilization. Communication can only ensue amid the interplay of a slave's waving motion and a flag (hybrid of man and technical medium), or of a slave and his voice, directed at his neighbour (hybrid of the voice of the knowing messenger and the ear of the subaltern, still-unknowing messenger, acting as an ancillary medium).

Second, this scene illustrates directly what constitutes an operational chain. A slave on foot, out on a limb in the hot savannah, could hardly pass along a message. Only the interconnection of the many messengers into a relay, including its control dispositive through the second row of guards, guarantees the correct transmission of the message. Thus, the operational chain consists to a certain extent of a horizontal component, the row of waving slaves, and of a vertical component, the row of watching slaves, which exercise a recursive function similar to coughing at court, insofar as they apply the same operation of relay formation to the results of this operation. Thus, here it is not the individual servant who constitutes the medium of transmission, but rather the collective, that is to say, the entirety of the slaves and supervisors interconnected into the relay.

And finally, it is not only the pure cultural technical action that is relevant, the *what* of the event, but also the *how*. The opulent image of

the messenger series begs the question of why there are so many slaves integrated into this operational chain. Why is such effort expended, when the servants could just as easily have been positioned comfortably within sight of one another – three instead of three hundred in the first shot from the battlement to the next cliff – or even a single reliable messenger could have been sent on horseback to the capital 100 km away, entirely without the recursive chain of guards? Without question, this transmission process feeds on an excess of human agents, on slaves in their function as servile, flag-bearing elements of transmission, which can claim greater significance in their aesthetic arrangement and their optical over-powering logic than mere functional necessity would require. The power of the ruler is duplicated in his footmen, who ostentatiously flaunt their idleness for him in vicarious inoccupation. In other words, a cultural technique like service also always comprises an aesthetic component, which observes aspects of style beyond pure functionality. Thus, the question would be whether even an eminent cultural technique like writing is a cultural technique per se, or if it is only in linguistic refinement, with its necessarily gradual increments, that a *cultural* added value comes to light that has yet to be produced. In this case, aesthetics and its qualitative classifications gain particular significance. Or, to choose a simpler example: just as you can theoretically criss-cross a field, ploughing through it entirely unsystematically, a farmer nevertheless usually follows a particular pattern of linearity, prescribed by expediency, but also by a certain aesthetics of the continuing, parallel line. Likewise, these aesthetic standards can be transferred to the messenger chain above, led by the thesis that the mere functionality of the transmission could also have been accomplished with far fewer personnel.

Regulating Rooms

In Franz Kafka's short prose work 'A Message from the Emperor' of 1917, originating four months after the death of the penultimate Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph, a message is also being delivered, albeit in this case to a 'wretched subject'. Sent by the dying emperor, here the message is carried onward by a single, human medium. The messenger on the way to his recipient,

thrusting forward now this arm, now the other, he cleared a path through the crowd; [...] he moves forward easily, like no other. But the crowds are so vast; their dwellings know no bounds. [...] he is still forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he overcome them; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to fight his way down the steps; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to cross the courtyard and, after the courtyard, the second enclosing

outer palace, and again stairways and courtyards, and again a palace, and so on through thousands of years. (Kafka, [1917] 2011: 41)

This largely subjunctive parable, which may also be understood as a companion piece with a reversed direction of motion to the doorkeeper parable 'Before the Law', initially raises a simple question: why doesn't the messenger run away? What actually prevents him from leaving the palace? Even if the text doesn't give any explicit information about this, it seems sensible to relate it to the doorkeeper parable simply because of its architectural arrangement. Both texts work with tiered spatial arrangements, typical of courts and their sophisticated ceremony, determined by the question of how and to whom access to certain rooms is granted. The reason for the imperial messenger's failed attempts to escape the innermost palace lies in the court ceremony and its limitation of access to the individual rooms: the messenger can't exit the palace because he comes across a relay which does not consist of simple messenger servants as in the previous scenario and which doesn't work *with him*, but is actually directed against him. Within a palace, everyone, including the messenger, is set against a cascade of courtiers who oppose them in order to prevent the delivery of the message. The messenger cannot get through, because he is ensnared in the system of power, between the other staff and their stooges. Why is it then that 'a strong, an indefatigable man' (Kafka, [1917] 2011: 41) cannot manage to overcome these hurdles? Because in each of the chambers he is delivered over to another doorkeeper and his respective control of access, who in turn stubbornly adheres to the provisions of his own chain of command or is guided by (excessively high?) bribes.

Thus, what are primarily of interest here are the spatial relations, and their respective regulation of access, with which the imperial messenger had to contend. How are the chambers and the architecture of the palaces constituted, through which the messenger must force his way for 'thousands of years', before he could reach the outermost door (but never, never can this happen)? The classic architecture of authority knows the representative corridor of power, also called *enfilade* thanks to its origin in the Vaux-le-Vicomte palace (see Figure 1), that suite of chambers, antechambers and ante-antechambers into which a normal supplicant would arrive before the law, or an envoy – overcoming doorkeeper after doorkeeper – would ultimately arrive before the sovereign, moving in the opposite direction of Kafka's imperial messenger. With the *enfilade*, the emperor had a system of signs that he could use to administer the labile system of his grace and of his subordinates' access to power, and project them on to a spatial order and logic of access.

In this *enfilade* (see Figure 2), a courtier passes through various instances of power, each controlled by the 'indirect beings' at the doors

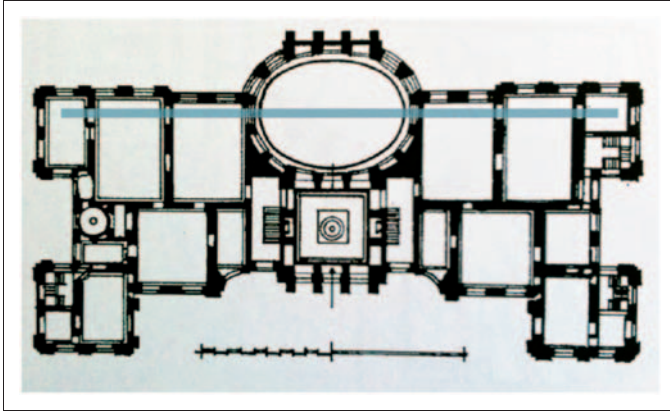


Figure 1. Ground-plan of Vaux-le-Vicomte palace (1656–1658) with suite of rooms.

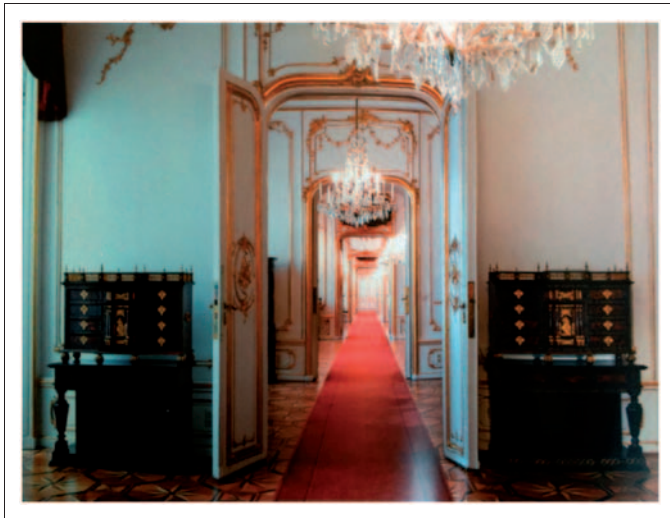


Figure 2. Enfilade in the Wiener Hofburg, Leopoldinischer Trakt.

(to borrow from Carl Schmitt, [1954] 2008), that is to say, the palace guards and doorkeepers, who have an abundance of power due to their specific knowledge and thanks to their precise familiarity with the place. In this inverted version of Kafka's other cascade of servants in 'Before the Law', where the way in goes through a series of ever more finely tiered doorkeepers who those seeking entry are able to see just as little as K. got to see the castle in close proximity, the movement is sufficient to shift from the internal to the external. From the centre of power, where the emperor lies wasting away, a view opens up on to an immensely

intricate spatial ensemble of suites, thresholds and detours that one must not just negotiate but even be acquainted with in the first place. A particular local knowledge is necessary to make one's way through a palace. By what logic are these paths constructed, in what way do they reflect courtly ceremony and the associated practices of service and of relations with subordinates? What role does architecture play when it comes to carrying out tasks officiously or giving underlings space for their service activities, whether in a limiting respect or in the form of a particular privilege or secret enabling? The nesting of the palaces makes the penetration of the rooms nearly impossible for the imperial messenger – there seems to be no outside for him to ultimately reach. What first sounds like fiction has its structural counterparts both historically as well as quite objectively in Kafka's time, for instance in the capital of the Habsburg monarchy, in Vienna's *Hofburg* palace, a conglomerate of various palaces from different periods and styles from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, which in addition to nearly endless suites of rooms (see Figure 2), is also complemented behind the scenes by a labyrinthine array of service architecture with its service corridors and backstairs, by which the imperceptible accommodation of the lordship by the subordinates is guaranteed.

But where does the much-touted power of the indirect being manifest itself concretely? In what tasks and gestures are the mechanisms of a cultural technique of service to be found? The subaltern is not generally permitted to enter into his field of activity with such ostentatious visibility as his lordships; rather, he finds himself in a relationship to them that demands servility, obedience and modesty. However, this dictum only relates to the front side, as it were, of that intricate relationship between master and servant, which counts among the basic constants of history. In fact, in the cultural technique of service one must incorporate an extremely important aspect, namely that reverse side of the grand stage, accompanied by a sometimes equally great abundance of power, even if it's not always easy to grasp or to describe. Ultimately, one of the first requirements of the servant consists of remaining invisible, despite physical presence. Thus, a general virtue of the servant lies in controlling the background inconspicuously. These very concrete practices of power express themselves not only in small gestures like opening doors or repelling intruders, attending table, assigning or tacitly taking places, in (self) situating or artificial diminution (through bowing) before the displayed power of the sovereign. Rather, these optimally hidden practices of the subaltern are also based on medial arrangements prescribed and determined by architecture.

In addition, this optimally hidden practice of servility encompasses the ability to find passages without being seen and manage arcane knowledge. The highways of power, stretching in the *enfilade*, are filled with careerists of all sorts and lined by indirect beings like the doorkeepers,

and are always doubled by the secret corridors of the underlings, of the lowest of the servants, who attain unforeseen power through their knowledge of hidden interconnections. Because, in the end, a palace does not simply have the official *enfilade*, but always also a vast collection of secret passages, hidden doors and special servants' stairs, through the knowledge of which only the servants maintain true control.

Just as the *enfilade* proves to be an indicator of power, with a metre-by-metre advance constituting the primary endeavour of the courtiers (or a departure, that of the imperial messenger), the supposed goal of this round dance seems to be the royal chambers (or the recipient of the imperial message), long-since abandoned and robbed of its centrality, because power itself is by no means concentrated directly in one person. Rather, it shows itself to be decentralized and distributed to such inconspicuous locations as thresholds with gatekeepers, concealed doors and hidden corridors. Power is splintered, its centre long-since dissolved, and strewn across various stations, delegated to underlings spread across long suites of rooms who each regulate the day-to-day balance of power at court in their own way by opening or closing doors, heating, traversing arcane paths, clearing out closets (and thereby having practical control of things), or more simply by talking or remaining silent at the right time.

Cultural Technique of Service

At the height of Victorianism, in an age when a large portion of the lowly and slightly less lowly tasks rested on the shoulders of domestics and subalterns of all sorts, an insight emerged from an unexpected source that was as modest as it was true: 'No culture without servants', as a Saxon nobleman and member of parliament, otherwise better known for his crude anti-Semitism, announced in 1875 (Treitschke, 1875: 17). What may at first seem to be a thoroughly chauvinistic remark coming from the mouth of Prussia's nationalist court historian Heinrich von Treitschke, professor of history at Berlin University, that he could 'imagine society without servants' just as little as Aristotle could picture his age without slaves, nevertheless proves undoubtedly to be a lucid insight for his time in its simple logic (Bebel, [1892] 1996: 649). What may be seen as commonplace in the mid-20th century¹ could by no means be seen as a self-evident, openly reflected fact shortly after the establishment of the empire. Even if Treitschke hardly intended for his comment to unduly elevate the subaltern class, to outspokenly grant them a significant share in the well-being of the ruling class, it nevertheless expresses unmistakably that it is ultimately the practices of the servants without which no cultural progress can be made.

Here, it is above all the small everyday gestures, the minimal movements, which contribute decisively to the success of the whole.

The practised hand movements of the underlings possess far more potential which evolves nearly imperceptibly. If service doesn't simply mean serving soup and clearing the plates, or organizing the household in every detail and providing for all possible comforts, but rather also consists not only of transmitting messages but filtering them, opening doors to then shut them again (sometimes on their own authority), not only following orders but anticipating them, if service not only means representing the prosperity of the lordship in glamorous liveries or standing in a row nearly naked with a flag in your hand but also carrying out special missions hidden from view in secret passages and hidden doors, then the agents of these trivial acts have more than a (modest) cultural educational function. They have nothing less than a specific agency. The servants are positioned strategically at the hubs of action, for instance at doorways, at which they control access. At the same time, they find themselves at the interfaces of communication, waiting discreetly in the background at dinner or waiting inconspicuously with a silver platter in the study, while policy is made over drinks and cigars. They alone regulate access to the *enfilade*, just as they have exclusive access to the supply channels of the royal residence. Apart from lovesick princes and fugitive queens, it is only the subaltern – and no special imperial envoy – who rush through the hidden corridors and passageways in the castle and the great houses, which form the backbone of the residences.

Aside from their knowledge of arcane paths and their control of these real connecting corridors, the domestics contribute with each imperceptible action to the establishment of a symbolic corridor which houses the real power. 'The process of corridor building which we're discussing here plays out on a daily basis in minimal, infinitesimal approaches, on a large and small scale, wherever people exercise power over one another' (Schmitt, [1954] 2008: 25). Through their actions, such as granting or denying entry, waiting and listening, both in the moments of decision that are wholly within the discretion of the servant, as well as through secret bribery and corruption on all levels of the hierarchy, the subaltern exercise a specific power, even if this power may seem marginal to outsiders. However, their strength lies precisely in this marginality, when unnoticed monitoring of conversations or unobserved observation open up new options for action not covered under their original mandate – i.e. serving as a representative according to the will of their master. It is in these fleeting intermediate stages, which momentarily open up a space for the subaltern to manoeuvre, that their influence lies, elevating them for the moment to free agents. Rejecting an unwanted supplicant at the threshold or letting him in always has consequences for the doorkeeper. Taking good news from a messenger in order to present it to the lordship oneself increases one's own esteem. The infinitesimal act on the periphery, the unassuming, almost imperceptible gesture, gradually adds power to the one who carries it out, becoming a distinct factor of influence

over time. In short, those medial basic operations that a subaltern routinely performs in small gestures are accompanied by a technique of power and domination that turns service into a basal cultural technique. If one cannot possess power, but rather only exercise it momentarily, then it is above all agents like the indirect beings that exercise a 'conduct of conducts' (cf. Foucault, [1982] 2002: 341) in their control of access to the sovereign and to the official representatives of the ruler, in their knowledge of the paths to knowledge and in their marginal dominion over the corridors. By way of their unassuming gestures, with the help of their marginal actions that filter and disseminate information, select and redistribute decisive tips as an everyday medial base operation, the servants regulate and control the corridors of power and thereby power itself.

On the one hand – according to the semi-official reading – the servant is a representative or *proxy* of his master, which degrades him to a subject in the literal sense of the subjugated, or – as with the footman – to a finely outfitted *persona* with no will of his own. The task of the underling consists of fulfilling the desires of his lord without question and straightforwardly executing his orders. He implements the ideas of his master, who in turn assumes responsibility for his deeds (Skrine, 1985: 252). Thus, the relation between lord and master is a basic sociotechnical constant throughout history. On the other hand, through his servile practices like regulating access at the doorway or transmitting, filtering and selecting information, the subaltern possesses an abundance of power, the scope of which he learns to gauge and use to his advantage at his job.

Where does the servant's technique of domination lead – if one may allow such a seemingly paradoxical formulation? A possible intent behind extending his scope of action may be improving his own position through self-empowerment and increasingly becoming a master in his own right. It contributes to the consistent increase in influence of the marginal agents. In contrast to others who are searching for work in general, servants are continually looking for a place made for them – the annual change in duty station sets the rhythm – and not least within the social hierarchy (see Robbins, 1986: 53). Thus, a component of the cultural technique of service consists of continually renegotiating one's current place in the hierarchy and moving it a little further up if possible: repositioning oneself. Improving one's standing. Climbing up. Every cultural refinement is based on this very fundamental mechanism; without it, decay and decline would rule. Such basal behaviours as mimetic processes, surrogacy, rapprochement to the representatives of power and empowerment are the strategies of the subaltern, in order to move imperceptibly but consistently into ever more influential positions. With each new step up the ladder, however small, the subject becomes somewhat more master than servant. Therein lies his own literal progress. This relatedness and arrangement into hierarchies, the constant reassignment of one's own position as well as that of others, is a technique of

culture that the subaltern make use of. Thus, one must count as a cultural technique of service not least positioning oneself (as favourably as possible), in a broad sense, in order to participate in the control of the totality through those countless hand gestures of power and infinitesimal acts. Just as (nearly) every targeted advancement at the forefront has the necessary insinuations, so the practices of service can't get by without a certain measure of servility.

As well as the focus on the obvious techniques that a culture requires in order to develop vital concepts and thus knowledge of itself, which certainly include writing as well as reading, calculating as well as organizing as 'eminent cultural techniques' (Siegert, 2005), it is also important to shift the perspective a bit toward the margins, in order to take into account the more imperceptible practices such as service in its physical, mental and manual activities, obstructing and closing as well as selecting and working invisibly. For out of these small actions of decision, the trivial routine work of the underlings, which in and of themselves would certainly be considered marginal, there emerges during service a sometimes tremendous wealth of opportunities to regulate the lordship. With the everyday hand movements and differentiations that invisible assistants carry out, those medial practices of mastery and construction come into use. Only an analysis decidedly dedicated to these small gestures is capable of achieving a comprehensive notion of culture and its techniques. However, in that such cultural techniques carry out symbolic work, they remain reliant upon media as agents (Macho, 2005: 77; Schüttpelz, 2006: 88). And in the realm of such infinitesimal but nevertheless culture-generating acts, the servant embodies this medium.

How is it that this *marginal man position* can have any epistemological relevance? The subaltern's principal area of activity, acting as inconspicuously as possible in the background amid the paradoxical imperative of persistent invisibility despite physical presence, brings a particular observer's perspective which is extremely helpful in potentially gaining knowledge. Who pays attention to the man serving the cognac? The valet's perspective reviled by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 1988: 437) offers a lasting advantage over those entangled in their chief-and-state plays. While the table talk revolves around important discussion points, the attendant domestic can assimilate vital information not intended for his ears. In his function as medium on the margins, the servant proves to be involved while simultaneously unnoticed, present and forgotten. According to plan, he assumes the position of the unseen third party, hardly distinguishing him from a house pet. 'The servant is the eternal "third man" in the private life [...] People are as little embarrassed in a servant's presence as they are in the presence of an ass' (Bakhtin, cited in Robbins, 1986: 108).

The domestic who is responsible for the personal needs of the powerful occupies a similarly advantageous position of knowledge. The medial

functions of the indirect beings, who regulate informational access to the lordship, also enable these kinds of advantages in insight within this position of trust. Like the waiter at official events, the *valet*, who controls the direct corridor to power, the last few metres to the royal bedchamber, occupies a privileged perspective. Once again, the valet proves his proximity to the sovereign in that he is not merely available to his lordship as an advisor at any time in matters of personal care or other concerns. Rather, he is the unfiltered, unmediated connection to the ruler, who provides the valet with an exclusive position from which he can observe while remaining unobserved, and make use of varied opportunities to influence decisions. *The servant who shaves the captain controls the ship*, as it goes in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* of 1857. It is not for nothing that contemporaries especially fear those people in such positions of trust, like the influence of the flautist Michael Gabriel Fredersdorf on Frederick II, hardly legitimized in any official capacity. It is not by chance that an inscrutable figure like John Brown, Queen Victoria's favourite valet, maintains a political factor that is difficult to assess (see Lamont-Brown, 2000; Marshall, 1949: 26). Its actual historical effect proves to be hard to measure in hindsight, inasmuch as the servant's position of trust moves between two extremes: the position of an actual potentate on the one hand, and on the other hand a relationship with his master that renders him closer to a lapdog: 'many [masters] wished to use such upper servants as footmen and lady's maids as confidantes, accomplices, go-betweens, and pets' (Porter, 1990: 104). Regardless of the distance to their master, this position is distinguished primarily by an epistemologically favourable position of observation. This is the privileged point of observation par excellence from which a special knowledge of power can be attained imperceptibly. Valets and waiters, butlers and footmen can assume this position, because they operate studiously in the background. This demonstrates a technique of refined culture when someone can work in secret while also being in full view. In a certain sense, the servant acts analogously to Edgar Allan Poe's *Purloined Letter*: he is in the room, constitutes the secret heart of the action, and yet no one takes notice of him.

In small gestures, with inconspicuous actions like attending and cleaning up, coughing and signalling, opening and closing, permitting and obstructing, in short: in attending to people and things, a servant connects and bundles various techniques that become cultural techniques through his interlacing actions. The seven characteristics mentioned contribute to the servant's heterogeneous actions being associated with cultural efficacy: (1) the interweaving of service in recursive patterns of action, (2) the connection of the individual servants into a collective and the associated delegation of activities, (3) the resulting dispersed agency passed from the individual to the hybrid collective of people and media, (4) the local knowledge of the subaltern, the familiarity

with the contexts of their activities, (5) the tendency of the servant toward repositioning through his respective activity, which fuels the innovative power of a cultural technique, not least (6) the aesthetic component of a cultural technique, which furnishes the subaltern actions with style beyond pure functionality, and finally (7) the epistemological component, which makes the *marginal man position* into a powerful one with the help of indirect control.

Particularly with the bundling of these characteristics, the subaltern's ability to act accumulates to form a power structure. It is true what the lowest of Kafka's doorkeepers says: 'But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other' (Kafka, [1915] 1995: 23). Service may be based on small gestures that obstruct or enable, permit or exclude. In their interconnection and catenation, in their bundling and accumulation, the various practices by which a servant organizes the life of his master generate power (to act) that is by no means minor. This enables the servant to contribute to the refinement of culture from below, so to speak, from the valet's perspective, with inconspicuous technical manipulations, in infinitesimal gestures. It is the cultural technique of service with its specific characteristics that endows the servomechanism of our things, the servant, with a relevant, highly influential form of action.

Translated by Charles Marcrum

Note

1. '[T]he domestic servant class has a special significance. It was an important agent in the process of cultural change' (Hecht, 1956: 200).

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