
INTRODUCTION

Cultural Techniques, or, the End of the Intellectual Postwar in German Media Theory

MEDIA THEORY IN GERMANY SINCE THE 1980S

In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Ernst Cassirer claimed that “the critique of reason is turning into the critique of culture.”¹ With the rise of so-called German media theory,² an alternate formula has emerged: *The critique of reason is turning into the critique of media*. Indeed, in the wake of German reunification and the subsequent countrywide reconstitution of cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaften*), a war is waging that pits “culture” against “media.” The stakes are considerable: Both combatants 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 both by a rapid succession of “turns” and by attempts to pacify combatants by introducing equalizing monikers such as “cultural media studies” (*kulturwissenschaftliche Medienforschung*). Around the turn of the millennium the war of and over German cultural studies witnessed the re-emergence of the old concept of “cultural techniques.” This phrase covers a lot of what Anglophone regions like to label “German media theory.” Therefore, in order to explain to the other side of the Channel and the Atlantic how this development affects so-called German media theory, it is necessary to step back and take another look at the latter.

The difficult reception of German media theory in Britain and North America was linked to the misunderstanding that it is a *theory of media*, as well as to the all-too-perceptive understanding that it never aspired to be a docile theory of media eager to join the humanities in their customary playground. What arose in the 1980s in Freiburg and has come to be associated with such names as Friedrich Kittler, Klaus Theweleit, Manfred Schneider, Norbert Bolz, Raimar

Zons, Georg-Christoph Tholen, Jochen Hörisch, Wolfgang Hagen, and Avital Ronell (and maybe also with 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), but it just didn't work.

The "media and literature analysis"—to invoke another short-lived label—that emerged in the 1980s was not primarily concerned with the theory or history of individual media. This was already the province of individual disciplines such as film studies, television studies, computer science, radio research, and so on. Rather, its focus was literature; it strove toward histories of the mind, soul, and senses removed from the grasp of literary studies, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, and thus ready for a transfer 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.³ But because *media* were less a focus than a change of the frame of reference for the traditional objects of the humanities—to quote Kittler's (in)famous words, it was a matter of "expelling the spirit from the humanities"—the traditional objects of research that defined communication studies (e.g., press, film, television, radio) 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 such as index cards, writing tools, typewriters, discourse operators (including quotation marks), pedagogical media such as the blackboard, various unclassifiable media such as phonographs or stamps, instruments such as the piano, and disciplining techniques such as alphabetization. These media, symbolic operators, and drill practices were located at the base of intellectual and cultural shifts, and they primarily comprise what we now refer to as *cultural techniques*. As indicated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's famous catchphrase, this changing of the humanities' frame of reference aimed to replace the hegemony of understanding, which inevitably tied meaning to a variant of subjectivity or self-presence, with "the materialities of communication"—the nonhermeneutic non-sense—as the base and abyss of meaning.⁴ As a result, the focus was less *what* was represented in the media, or how and why it was represented, or why it was represented in one way rather than 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 itself to the exterior and material conditions of what constitutes semantics. Media therefore were not only an alternate frame of reference for philosophy

and literature, but also an attempt to overcome French theory's fixation on discourse by turning discourse from its philosophical or archeological head onto its historical and technological feet. While Derrida's diagnosis of Rousseau's orality remained stuck in a thoroughly ahistorical phonocentrism,⁵ this orality was now referred to the historico-empirical cultural technique of a maternally centered eighteenth-century oral pedagogy.⁶ Derrida's *principe postale*, in turn, was no longer a metaphor for *différance*,⁷ but a marked reminder that *différance* always already comes about by means of the operating principles of technical media. 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 Michel Foucault's concept of the "historical apriori" into a "technical apriori" by referring the Foucauldian "archive" to media technologies.

This archeology of cultural systems of meaning—which some chose to vilify by affixing the ridiculous label of *media determinism* or *techno-determinism*—was (in Nietzsche's sense of the phrase) 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 humanities), at a time when nobody had yet seriously addressed the concept of media. Moreover, it was archival obsession rather than passion for theory that made renegade humanities scholars focus their attention on media as the material substrate of culture. 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 assault on their academic habitat to ask what theoretical justification lay behind this invasion.

In other words, what set German media theory on a collision course with Anglo-American media studies as well with communication studies and sociology—all of which appeared bewitched by the grand directive of social enlightenment to ponder exclusively the role of media within the public sphere—was the act of abandoning mass media and the history of communication in favor of those insignificant, unprepossessing technologies that underlie the constitution of meaning and thus elude the grasp of our usual methods of understanding. And here we come face to face with a decisive feature of this posthermeneutic 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” (itself a fictional construct bequeathed to us by Enlightenment thought) will systematically misconstrue the abyss of nonmeaning 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 for 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 such as *Die Zeit*, social science and philosophy departments, and bourgeois feuilletons), this abyss was referred to as “war.” If the telegraph, the telephone, or the radio were analyzed as mass media at all, then it was with a view toward 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 (a reception that was accompanied by a lenient disregard of Virilio’s pessimistically inclined anthropology).⁸ 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 nonteleological history of practices and technologies enacted and performed via laboratories, instruments, and “experimental systems.”⁹

“Public sphere” versus “war”: This was the polemical binary under which German media theory of the 1980s assumed its distinct shape. To invoke the “public sphere” entailed ideas such as enlightened consciousness, self-determination, freedom, and so on, while to speak of “war” implied an unconscious processed by symbolic media as well as 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 signifier unmoored from meaning and reference turned towards the history of communication engineering that had been blocked out by humanist historiography. However, the history of communication was not simply denied; it now appeared as an epoch of media rather than as a horizon of meaning. Continuing Heidegger’s history of being (*Seinsgeschichte*), the history of communication was conceived of as an epoch both in the sense of a specific segment of historical time and as an *Ansichhalten* (“holding oneself back”) of media.¹⁰ The goal was to highlight the possibility of thinking media differently, that is, not only as part of the history of communication, as has been done since Karl Knies’ history of the division of mental labor. Clearly, this was a departure from the usual “logocentric” narrative that starts out with the immediacy of oral communication, passes through

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a differentiation of scriptographic and typographic media, and then leads to the secondary orality of radio.¹¹

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? Is every history of the postal system a media history? 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 Friedrich II of Hohenstaufen replaced parchment with paper, this act decisively changed the meaning of "power."¹² 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.¹³ Finally, a history of the postal system is a media history if it serves as the system of reference for a history of communication.¹⁴ That is to say, media do not emerge independently and outside of a specific historical practice. Yet at the same time, history is itself a system of meaning that operates across a media-technological abyss of nonmeaning 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 antihumanist rejection of the tradition of enlightenment and the 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 rooted in the history of cybernetics. Within the United States, the posthuman emerged from a framework defined by the blurring of the boundaries between man and machine. However, just as U.S. postcybernetic 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. Hence the cybernetically grounded American "posthuman" differed from the French "posthumanism" rooted in Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, especially when taking into account their media-theoretical embeddedness. Within the framework of cybernetics, the notion of "becoming human" had as its point of departure an anthropological, stable humanity of the human that lasted until increasing feedback systems subjected the human to increasing hybridizations, in the course of which the human either turned into a servomechanism attached to machines and networks, or into a machine programmed by alien software.¹⁵ By contrast, French (and German) posthumanism signaled that the humanities had awakened from their "anthropological slumber." As a result this type of posthumanism

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entailed an antihermeneutics that sought to deconstruct humanism as an occidental transcendental system of meaning production.¹⁶ 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 rather, *How was the human always already historically mixed with the nonhuman?*

I see...

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 recognize 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 of Critical Animal Studies and postcybernetic studies brought about a new understanding of media, as well as a reconceptualization of the posthuman as always already intertwined between human and nonhuman.

"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 labeled antihermeneutic, the second phase (from the late 1990s to the present), which witnessed the conceptual transformation of media into cultural techniques, may be labeled posthermeneutic. Underneath this change, which served to relieve media and technology of the burden of having to play the bogeyman to 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 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 World War Two and came to be part and parcel of the moral duty of the German postwar intellectual. (In a talk on German postwar philosophy after Heidegger *and* Adorno at the Collège International de Philosophie in 1984, Werner Hamacher—referring to, among others, Habermas and Henrich—polemically alluded to this obligation by speaking of German “reparation payments” to Anglo-Saxon common-sense rationalism and philosophies of norms and normativity.) Given that the antihermeneutic techno-euphoria of “media analysis” and the media-materialist readings of French theory rebelled against the same set of ideas, it was no coincidence that German media theory gleefully deployed Foucauldian discourse analysis, the machinic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari, or the posthumanist Lacanian logic of the signifier against the technophobia of Critical Theory. Not surprisingly, U.S. 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.¹⁷

It was, ironically, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the German Democratic Republic that helped redirect German postwar media theory by supplying new coordinates. Among the latter was cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaften*), which in 1990 no longer existed in West Germany but had been practiced in the GDR, and now became one of the few Eastern heirlooms to gain acceptance in the newly united Germany. As a result, much of what perhaps should not have been referred to as *media* but was nonetheless assigned the label in order to be polemically deployed against long-standing hermeneutic aspirations and Critical Theory’s yearning for a nonalienated 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 both on a personal and an institutional level media history and research came to abandon the shelter granted to them by literature departments. I myself left the institutional spaces of *Germanistik* in 1993 to become an assistant professor of the History and Aesthetics of Media in the re-established Institut für Kultur- und Kunstwissenschaft at 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, with critical attention no longer focused on revealing which media technologies provide 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, for one, kept debunking as “so-called man” (*der sogenannte Mensch*). With the shift to cultural techniques, however, German media theory adopted a considerably more relaxed attitude towards a historical anthropology that relates cultural communication to technologies rather than to anthropological constants. **By latching onto the old concept of cultural techniques, German media theory signals its interest in “anthropotechnics.”**¹⁸

As indicated above, **this postwar turn from anti- to posthumanism** appears to resemble the U.S. turn from a somewhat restricted understanding of posthumanism as a form of transhumanism (i.e., the biotechnological hybridization

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of human beings) to a more complex program of *posthumanities* eager to put some polemical distance between itself and old notions of the posthuman.¹⁹ To be sure, what both turns have in common is a reluctance to interpret the “post” in posthuman in a historical sense, as something that comes “after the human.” In both cases the “post” implies a sense of “always already,” an ontological entanglement of human and nonhuman. However, the nonhuman of the German 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.²⁰

nicely put

a largely fair assessment

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 the German understanding of cultural techniques and the French confluence of anthropology and technology that is now of such great importance to the American debate, critical transatlantic differences remain. While the American side pursues a deconstruction of the anthropological difference with a strong ethical focus, the Germans are more concerned with its technological or medial fabrication. From the point of view of the cultural techniques approach, anthropological difference is less the effect of a stubborn anthropo-phallo-carno-centric metaphysics than the result of culture-technical and media-technological practices. The differences 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 media functions of animals—that is, with the way in which concrete culture techniques such as domestication and breeding, sacrificial practices, and killing methods, in connection with the emblemization of certain medial virtues and capabilities of animals,²¹ serve to create, shift, erode, and blur the anthropological difference.

The study of cultural techniques, however, is not aimed at removing the anthropological differences between human animal and nonhuman animal by means of subtle deconstructionist 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. Neither is it bent on critiquing the dogma of pure ontological difference. Rather, it is concerned with decentering the distinction between human and nonhuman by insisting on the radical technicity of this distinction.²²

another useful distinction

Human and nonhuman 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 decentering 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 onto animals, which now appear as the better humans.

But what, then, were and are cultural techniques? Conceptually we may distinguish three phases.

1. Ever since antiquity the European understanding of culture implies that it is technologically constituted. The very word *culture*, derived from Latin *colere* and *cultura*, refers to the development and practical usage of means of cultivating and settling the soil with homesteads and cities.²³ As an engineering term, *Kulturtechnik*, usually translated as agricultural or rural engineering, has been around since the late nineteenth century.²⁴ 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 coevolutionary domestication promote the anthropological difference between humans and animals), the line the plough draws across the soil, and the calendar that regulates sowing and 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.²⁵ Similar ideas relating to the production of ontological distinctions by means of ontic cultural techniques are to be found in American posthumanities, for instance, with regard to houses and the cultural techniques of dwelling.²⁶ 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 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 prefers philosophical idealizations.

2. Starting in the 1970s, *Kulturtechniken* also came to refer to elementary *Kulturtechniken* or basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Television and other information and communications technologies were added in the 1980s. What separates that particular usage of the term from its more recent application is that it still reveals a traditional middle-class understanding of culture, linking it 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, it alludes to the 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 challenges 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 a nineteenth-century middle-class tradition that conceived of culture exclusively in terms of the book reigning over all of the other arts.**²⁷

3. 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 alphanumeric code. Operative forms of writing such as calculus, cards, and catalogs, 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.** Depending on the degree to which these disciplines are affected by the “cultural turn,” the concept of cultural techniques may be able to provide a systematic foundation for paleoanthropology, animal studies, the philosophy of technology, the anthropology of images, ethnology, fine arts, and the histories of science and the law.

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.²⁸ 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 recent discussions, we can add five further features that characterize the theoretical profile of cultural techniques.

this remains a tough sell in the humanistic, posthumanist, literary, many of the dogmatists

(i) Essentially, cultural techniques are conceived of as operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate. Cultural historian Thomas Macho has remarked,

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 to this day, people may 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.²⁹

However, operations such as counting or writing always presuppose technical objects capable of performing—and to considerable extent, determining—these operations. As a historically given micronetwork of technologies and techniques, cultural techniques are the “exteriority/materiality of the signifier.”³⁰ An abacus allows for different calculations than do ten fingers; a computer, in turn, allows for different calculations than does 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.³¹

(ii) To speak of cultural techniques presupposes a notion of plural cultures. This is not only in deference to politically correct notions of multiculturalism; it also implies a posthumanist understanding of culture that no longer posits man as the only, 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.”³² 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 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 labeled 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.”³³ Indeed, the term has experienced a detrimental inflation: search engines reveal that planning, transparency, yoga, gaming, 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 can 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 is 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*.³⁴

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-order* 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.³⁵ Hence every instance of boiling, roasting, or smoking is always already an act of communication, because it communicates both the inside and the outside that within a certain culture certain animals are boiled, roasted, and/or 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.

Ploughing can be a symbolic act as well. 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

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doors, too, are a fundamental cultural technique, given that the operation of opening and closing them processes and renders visible the distinction between inside and outside (see chapter 10 in this volume). A door, then, is both material object and symbolic thing, a first-order 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 shoot it into an animal.³⁶ 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? (See chapter 4 in this volume.)

In short, it is problematic to base an understanding of cultural techniques on static concepts of technologies and symbolic work, that is, on ontologically operating differentiations 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-order 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 things/signifiers can exist because of the interchange of materials/information across the ever-emergent boundaries by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium/channel.³⁷

The following chapters aim to explore these processes. 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-order 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.³⁸ Following this insight, Gottfried Semper, who argued that “most of the decorative symbols used in architecture originated or were derived from the textile arts,” conceived of the wall, a basic first-order architectural technique, as a second-order technique that came equipped with an originary self-reference.³⁹ In this way we may also distinguish

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Marcel Mauss's so-called "techniques of the body" from cultural techniques,⁴⁰ that is, from the different ways in which cultures make use of bodily activities such as swimming, running, giving birth.⁴¹ On the other hand, the recursive chains of operation that constitute cultural techniques always already contain body techniques. According to Mauss, writing, reading, and calculating, too, are techniques of the body rather than exclusively mental operations; they are the results of teaching docile bodies, which today are forced to compete with 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. 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 distinction 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.⁴² **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. Concrete actions serve to distinguish them from earlier nondifferentiatedness. **In more general terms, all cultural techniques are based on the transition from nondistinction to distinction and back.**

Yet we always have to bear in mind that the distinction between nature and culture is itself 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

The work of
Ma-
construction

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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.”⁴³

it can
be said
to
re. de.
compose
this
articulation

(v) Cultural techniques are not only media that sustain codes, and disseminate, internalize, and institutionalize sign systems; they also destabilize cultural codes, erase signs, and deterritorialize sounds and images. Apart from cultures of distinction, we also have cultures of de-differentiation (what once was labeled “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 decolonize bodies, images, text, and music.⁴⁴ 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 eludes 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 a historically informed understanding of electric and electronic media as part of the technical and mathematical operationalization of the real. It will therefore by necessity 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.

God

The papers collected in this volume are revisions of articles and lectures written between 2001 and 2011. I will begin with a text that attempts to demonstrate how typographic, telephonic, and computer-generated media of text production may be described as cultural techniques. **The three case studies that form the core of the paper focus on the specific ways in which media filter the symbolic from the real, or messages from channels full of noise.** The methodological gain derived from using the cultural techniques approach is most apparent when the ontological distinction between symbols (as defined by logic) and signals (as defined by communications engineering) is replaced by the practical problem of distinguishing between them. The next four papers deal with

cultural techniques related to the anthropological domain. That domain appears, first, in the context of eating. Established rituals of food intake (for which the Last Supper may serve as a paradigm for Christian-occidental culture) presuppose an already existing distinction between gods, humans, and animals, as well as between those who eat and that which is eaten. Second, **the anthropological is an effect of the problematic distinction between different species of talking animals (*parlêtres*)**. If, as Aristotle decreed, man is an animal endowed with the gift of speech, then throughout the histories of philosophy, pedagogy, and literature this particular animal will be trailed by a host of other speaking animals (such as woodpeckers and parrots) that it has to be distinguished from—despite or because of the fact that their excluded gift of speech is always already marked as part of humanity. Third, the anthropological appears as a result of seafaring. According to Sophocles, seafaring is nothing less than a primordial cultural technology marked by a complex actor network that I will analyze using the example of the shipbuilding and navigational practices among the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands. And fourth, the anthropological emerges as a type of subject constitution on the boundary between land and sea, Spain and America, when the bureaucratized state invented archival and notational techniques designed to make those who otherwise would have disappeared without a trace into historical darkness speak of themselves.

The next three chapters center on the importance of graphic operations as media of construction. Both “(Not) At Its Place” and “White Spots and Hearts of Darkness” focus on the decisive importance of the grid, which effectively combines an imaging process (Alberti’s *velum*) with a topographical planning procedure (the colonial settlement of Latin America). It is this linking of representational and operative functions that turns the grid into a cultural technique, which can also be shown in the case of the fifteenth-century emergence of design (*disegno*) that is indebted to the link-up between the artisanal practices of Italian Renaissance artists and the rediscovered grid of longitudes and latitudes. The third text within this grouping (“Waterlines”) examines how various shipbuilding techniques from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century mobilize the ontological and epistemic potential of the line.

The final two chapters are concerned with various cultural techniques of folding, opening, and closing by focusing on a specific type of operation that links media such as books, winged altars, and doors. “Figures of Self-Reference” takes as its point of departure the *trompe-l’oeil* technique of Dutch still life paintings in order to analyze genre-specific objects such as alcoves or tables as objects that emerged from the self-observation of the illuminated pages of Flemish books of hours. In this case we are dealing with the ontology of pictorial

something like the "fourfold"?

Hawthorne's more recent work

objects constituted by medial acts. In conclusion, the final text investigates doors as a cultural technique that processes, modifies, thwarts, and virtualizes the distinction between inside and outside. Thus the door emerges as a symbolic machine capable of weaving together diverse realities—the numinous and the profane, the imaginary and the real.

CULTURAL TECHNIQUES (SNAPSHOTS)

1.

linguistic three phases.

i. Ever since antiquity the European understanding of culture implies that it is technologically constituted. The very word *culture*, derived from Latin *colere* and *cultura*, refers to the development and practical usage of means of cultivating and settling the soil with homesteads and cities.²³ As an engineering

geo composition
resonances

2.

age that challenges the monopoly of the *alphabetic* (Lacan) over our senses. By establishing a link with the older, technologically oriented understanding of culture, **cultural techniques research breaks with a nineteenth-century middle-class tradition that conceived of culture exclusively in terms of the book reigning over all of the other arts.**²⁷

1890-1910
1910-1930
1930-1950
1950-1970
1970-1990
1990-2010
2010-2020

3. To be sure, within the new media-theoretical and culturalist context cul-

3.

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. Depending on the degree to which these disciplines are affected by the "cultural turn," the concepts of cultural techniques work to provide

i.

(i) Essentially, **cultural techniques are conceived of as operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate.** Cultural historian Thomas Macho has remarked,

ii.

and cultural techniques standing in for verbs."³² 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 different "dispositives of being" (nat-

iii.

In short, it is problematic to base an understanding of cultural techniques on static concepts of technologies and symbolic work, that is, on ontologically operating differentiations between first- and second-order techniques. Separative interactive navigational instruments.

iv.

(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

v.

(v) Cultural techniques are not only media that sustain codes, and disseminate, internalize, and institutionalize sign systems; **they also destabilize cultural codes, erase signs, and deterritorialize sounds and images.** Apart from cultures of distinction, we also have cultures of de-differentiation (what once was labeled "savage" and placed in direct opposition to culture). **Cultural tech-**

cooking is first!
second order:
cooking is
thematized by
cooking itself

distinctions introduced and maintained by cultural techniques/media

"wild" vs. "domesticated" animals generated by the fence and the gate: as was the rancher

change the type of door from a handled one to a revolving one and you have re-differentiated (see his chapter on doors near the end)

"We become unhinged."