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## Special Issue: Cultural Techniques

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# Cultural Techniques: Preliminary Remarks

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## Abstract

These introductory remarks outline the German concept of *Kulturtechniken* (cultural techniques) by tracing its various overlapping meanings from the late 19th century to today and linking it to developments in recent German theory. Originally related to the agricultural domain, the notion of cultural techniques was later employed to describe the interactions between humans and media, and, most recently, to account for basic operations and differentiations that give rise to an array of conceptual and ontological entities which are said to constitute culture. In the second part of the essay, cultural techniques are analyzed as a concept that allows theorists to overcome certain biases and impasses characteristic of that domain of German media theory associated with the work of the late Friedrich Kittler.

## Keywords

cultural studies, cultural techniques, German media theory, material culture

This special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* is dedicated to *Kulturtechniken* ('cultural techniques'), one of the most interesting and fertile concepts to have emerged in German cultural theory over the last decades.<sup>1</sup> Our goal was to compile a collection that can serve as both archive and toolbox. For readers with a more historically-oriented interest in the multilayered past of the concept, we included important earlier proposals to define *Kulturtechniken* as well as more recent attempts to (re)write the history of the concept in light of current theory debates. For those more concerned with possible applications and implications, we encouraged contributors to apply their particular understanding of *Kulturtechniken* to new, sometimes unexpected, domains – from servants and swarms all the way to the basic reconfiguration of our understanding of time and machinic temporality. We are, in short, interested in

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unfolding the concept and probing its use value. Our two guiding questions are: What are cultural techniques? And what can be done with the concept?

These questions, however, are as easy to pose as they are difficult to answer. Although several contributions – especially those by Bernard Geoghegan and Bernhard Siegert – will provide in-depth historical overviews, it is necessary to add a couple of preliminary observations. These remarks will not answer the question posed in our title; they will at best serve to trace the obstacles that stand in the way of a satisfactory response. The basic difficulties arise from four closely related points to be elaborated below. (i) The term *Kulturtechniken* entered the German language on three separate occasions with three different conceptual inflections. (ii) Matters would be easier if more recent employments of the term had retired older meanings, but unfortunately all three are still in use. (iii) It is not always clear which meaning theorists have in mind (if indeed they have any particular one in mind); moreover, some theorists like to play the meanings off against each other. (iv) This conceptual jousting is related to attempts to deploy the term in line with particular theory agendas. In other words, ‘cultural techniques’ is a multi-layered term that is often shoehorned into fairly specific approaches. Rather than tackling the question ‘What are cultural techniques?’, it makes more sense to ask: ‘What is the question to which the concept of cultural techniques claims to be an answer?’

With this in mind, the following observations will offer a mixture of signposts and side planks designed to provide some orientation in the maze of possible definitions and to prevent the reader from being thrown off balance by the sudden changes in direction between the papers. We will proceed in two steps. First, we will review the three different meanings of *Kulturtechniken*. In each case it will be necessary to foreground ramifications and implications of the particular way in which the term is used. Second, the emergence of the term’s third and theoretically most sophisticated meaning will be related to a specific juncture in recent German cultural theory. To anticipate one of our principal conclusions, the most important issues addressed by the culture-technical approach are related to problems arising from the development of so-called German media theory. While Jussi Parikka’s Afterword will survey what has come out of the lively German discussions – achievements, shortcomings and promising points of contact across the Channel and the Atlantic – these preliminary observations will focus on what went into the concept, and why on occasion it did not go in peacefully.

### Triple Entry

The term *Kulturtechniken* first gained prominence in the late 19th century, at which point it referred to large-scale amelioration procedures

such as irrigating and draining arable tracts of land, straightening river beds, or constructing water reservoirs. It also included the study and practice of hydrology and geodesy. K., the hapless surveyor unable to gain entrance to Franz Kafka's *Castle*, is a *Kulturtechniker*. This first instantiation of *Kulturtechnik*, usually translated into English as 'rural' or 'environmental engineering', is still very much in use. But more importantly (and irritatingly), it is at times tactically *put to use* by some who have a very different meaning in mind.

It is crucial to highlight some of the implications and ramifications of this first emergence. If *Kulturtechnik* refers to rural engineering, then the *Kultur* in question is far removed from more refined notions of *Kultur* or culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'. Matthew Arnold was concerned with culture and anarchy, not with ploughing and draining. In this particular context *Kultur*/culture is first and foremost a matter of *agriculture*. As many of our contributors would point out, this particular inflection of the term appeals to its etymological roots: culture, Latin *cultura*, derives from *colere* ('tend, guard, cultivate, till'), but the initial meaning was soon overrun by a sequence of semantic tribal migrations which turned culture – that 'damned word' Raymond Williams wished he had never heard (Williams, 1979: 154) – into a concept as overloaded as it is indispensable (for an overview see Williams, 1983: 97–103). To rephrase the initial reference to husbandry on a more abstract level, culture is that which is ameliorated, nurtured, rendered habitable and, as a consequence, structurally opposed to nature, which is seen as either actively resistant (the hoarding dragon that must be killed to release the powers of circulation) or indifferent (the swamp that must be drained, the plains that must be settled). But now a question arises that will haunt *Kulturtechnik* throughout its conceptual metamorphoses: which of the two domains does this act of creation by means of separation belong to? Is using a plough to draw a line in the ground in order to create a future city space set off from the surrounding land itself already part of that city? In that case matters would be easy: culture creates itself in an act of immaculate self-conception that is always already cultural. Culture would be culture all the way down. Or do the operations involved in drawing this line belong to neither side? A proper understanding of culture may require that the latter be dissolved into cultural techniques that are neither cultural nor natural in any originary sense because they generate this distinction in the first place.

The second emergence of *Kulturtechniken* around the 1970s is linked to the growing awareness of modern – that is, analog and increasingly digital – media as the dubious shapers of society. To speak of cultural techniques in this context is to acknowledge the skills and aptitudes necessary to master the new media ecology. Watching television, for instance, requires specific technological know-how (identifying the on/off button, mastering the remote, programming the VCR) as well as

equally medium-specific 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 distinguish between intended and unintended messages. All these skills, aptitudes and abilities are part of the *Kulturtechniken des Fernsehens*, the cultural techniques of television. At this point, *Kulturtechnik* comes close to what in English is referred to as 'media competence'. Very soon, however, this focus on modern media technologies was expanded and 'basic' skills such as counting and writing came to be labelled *elementare Kulturtechniken* ('elementary cultural techniques').

Once again we must unravel the implications. If the first, agricultural instantiation of the term aimed at techniques that transformed nature into culture, this second usage of *Kulturtechniken* implies a very similar operation: it indicates a culturalization of technology, in particular, of those media technologies frequently denounced as inimical to culture. First we enculture what allegedly preceded culture, now we enculture what threatens to erode it. This latter move, however, is highly ambivalent, and its thrust or bias depends on which part of the compound noun *Kulturtechnik* you choose to privilege. Does *Kultur* rule over *Technik*, or is *Kultur* subsumed under *Technik*? If you opt for the former, you are extending the sovereignty of culture into the domain of technology. You are, as it were, treating media technologies like the barbarians on the other side of wall who may enter and become part of the empire of culture once it is assured that they support established cultural paradigms. If they submit to Roman rule, they will gain Roman citizenship. Bernhard Siegert, who spent his intellectual novitiate in the anti-humanist red-light district of Freiburg of the early 1980s, is quick to discern a retrograde agenda at work here. Methodological procedures and hermeneutic paradigms developed in the high typographic age of humanist literacy are striving to co-opt technological domains they do not understand to support an anthropocentrism they have not thought through. On the other hand, if you grant priority to the *Technik* in *Kulturtechnik*, the thrust is reversed. Rather than projecting notions of culture into (future) technology, technology is retrojected into (past) culture. The materiality and technicity so obviously on display in modern media technologies is now recognized to already have permeated their allegedly untechnical, more 'natural' predecessors – including the so-called elementary cultural techniques like writing, drawing and counting. Cultural techniques reveal that there never was a document of culture that was not also one of technology.

A second important ambiguity concerns the question whether acquiring the skills and aptitudes required to handle a given technology or procedure confirms our traditional role as the masters of our tools and protocols, or whether we are in fact dealing with the reverse process in

the course of which we are inscribed by things and routines. We can detect the faint outlines of Hegel's master/slave dialectic: Are we really the masters of our domain, or is the feeling of mastery a delusion created and sustained by those we believe we have mastered? Are we duped by the cunning of our tools? In her contribution Cornelia Vismann recasts this question in a legal light by introducing the question of sovereignty. How sovereign are we when we interact with tools that prescribe their own usage, have an inbuilt purpose, and constrain our actions with their material properties?

One must therefore draw a distinction between persons, who *de jure* act autonomously, and cultural techniques, which *de facto* determine the entire course of action. To inquire about cultural techniques is not to ask about the feasibility, success, chances and risks of certain innovations and inventions in the domain of the subject. Instead, it is to ask about the self-management or auto-praxis [*Eigenpraxis*] of media and things, which determine the scope of the subject's field of action.

This formulation would in theory still allow for the notion of a pre-existing sovereign subject that by engaging with 'media or things' forfeits some of its sovereignty but that reasserts it once it withdraws into an unsullied state of non-intervention (for instance, Cartesian contemplation). But we know better (as does Vismann). We can see the next, more radical conclusion rapidly approaching: namely, that the very subject whose sovereignty is under debate was created by the operations which are then said to limit its 'field of action'.

At this point we have crossed over into the third meaning of *Kulturtechnik*, which emerged around the turn of the millennium within the newly established domain of institutionalized *Kulturwissenschaften*. While this theoretically most informed instantiation draws on the preceding two, it is also fuelled by philosophical and anthropological considerations. More precisely: it radicalizes the key points of the first two meanings to such a degree that cultural techniques come to transcend the confines of literary studies, media theory and cultural studies and enter the domain of philosophy and anthropology. In order to understand the latter the best point of entry is to return to the ambiguities of the second meaning and unfold their radical implications.

## Dressing down Man and Being

To repeat, the second instantiation of *Kulturtechnik* referred to the skills and aptitudes involved in mastering a given technology. This meaning of the term, no doubt, pays homage to the rapidly expanding and



increasingly complex technical, social, and administrative mediation processes that characterize life in modern society. So extensive are these processes that it was only a matter of time before observers started to question the precarious status of its three core entities: (i) the subject performing these operations; (ii) the basic concepts, ideas and notions that appear to guide these operations; and (iii) the object manipulated by these operations. To put it in a nutshell: so much is happening between here and there, so difficult has it become to get a grip on the procedures that lead from here to there, that we are forced to confront the possibility that there was never a 'here' or 'there' to begin with; both are a product of the between.

Let us start with (iii), that is, the notion that tools, operations protocols and/or procedures create the object. In his contribution to this issue Sebastian Vehlken offers a media archaeology of swarm research. Historically, the analysis of swarming and emergent behaviour is not merely assisted by, it fundamentally depends on storage and computing technologies superior to the processing speeds of the human sensorium. Whether or not media determine political swarms is up to debate; they certainly determine our ability to think of swarms in the first place (Vehlken, 2012: 413). On the object as well as the meta-level, then, swarms are the ultimate performance (and product) of cultural techniques: they would not be without media, and their emergent behaviour illustrates the way in which so many other, ontologically seemingly far more secure objects emerge from culture-technical operations.

This leads us directly to (ii) – the emergence of basic concepts and guiding notions from cultural techniques. It is at this point in the debate that students will inevitably encounter a now canonical passage by Thomas Macho (which is quoted in several essays in this issue):

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)

We did not start out with the idea or concept of *the* number and then derive from it our quotidian counting operations; rather, early counting practices in time generated the notion of the number. Think, for instance, of Denise Schmandt-Besserat's (1996) acclaimed history of writing. Writing may have turned into the visible representation of spoken



language, but that is not how it began. Rather, there was a sequence of exaptations in the course of which humans came to reflect on language and communication in terms of the sign systems they employed. Writing emerged from early accounting practices involving tokens; the tokens were gradually abstracted into signs; and finally, the resulting sign value was used to approximate names for taxation purposes. Counting and accounting precede writing. It is at this point that the idea of writing as supplement to the spoken word can take hold. Procedural chains and connecting operations give rise to notions and concepts that are then endowed with a certain ontological distinctiveness – and which are therefore in need of a techno-material deconstruction.

Finally, point (i), the subject. If ideas, concepts and in some cases the objects themselves emerge from basic operations, then it is only logical to assume that this also applies to the agent performing these operations. Once again, the recourse to elementary cultural techniques provides the best example. (Indeed, it is highly instructive to observe how in discussing elementary cultural techniques theorists like Siegert and Vismann will – not without a certain polemical panache – invoke the first, agricultural meaning of *Kulturtechnik*, enrich it with the theoretical sophistication of the third meaning, and then deploy it to both encircle and challenge the humanist overtones of the second.) After introducing the notion of limited and transferred sovereignty mentioned above, Vismann arrives at a more radical diagnosis:

To start with an elementary and archaic cultural technique, a plough drawing a line in the ground: the agricultural tool determines the political act; and the operation itself produces the subject, who will then claim mastery over both the tool and the action associated with it. Thus, the *Imperium Romanum* is the result of drawing a line – a gesture which, not accidentally, was held sacred in Roman law. Someone advances to the position of legal owner in a similar fashion, by drawing a line, marking one's territory – ownership does not exist prior to that act.

Macho stresses how guiding notions – many of which are the subsequent beneficiaries of philosophical ennoblement – arise from as yet non-conceptualized quotidian practices; Vismann, in turn, stresses how culture-technical operations coalesce into entities that are subsequently viewed as the agents or subjects running these operations (and who receive similar philosophical blessings). Students of German philosophy will realize that we have moved from the idealist pastures of the Hegelian master/slave into the more arduous Heideggerian territory of ontic-ontological distinctions. Indeed, one pithy way to describe the rise of *Kulturtechniken* in German cultural theory is to label it part of a large-scale, albeit largely uncoordinated, Heidegger update. As the resolutely

anti- or counter-Platonic stance of the Macho quote above indicates, the study of cultural techniques aims at revealing the ontic operations that underlie and give rise to ontological distinctions which are then liable to take over thought. The older Heidegger came to oppose philosophy to *Denken* (thinking); the study of cultural techniques provides a kind of flanking manoeuvre by relating the thinking of *Sein* (Being) to the processing and operating of bits and pieces of *Seiendes* (beings).

The anthropological implications are arguably a great deal more important and interesting. They are closely related to the philosophical implications, which comes as no surprise given that in the German intellectual tradition *Anthropologie* is as closely related to philosophy as Anglo-American anthropology is to ethnology. To understand what is at stake it is crucial to point out that, from the point of view of the culture-technical approach, the human body is no less of an inscription surface than any other storage medium, including the human mind. Cultural techniques therefore include what Marcel Mauss termed body techniques (*techniques du corps*). Indeed, Mauss's famous 1934 lecture on body techniques is indispensable for an expanded understanding of cultural techniques. 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 favour 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.

The basic anthropological implication consists in the retrojection backwards into the dawn of species developments: what we call *the human* is always already an emergent product arising from the processual interaction of domains that in time are all too neatly divided up into the technical and the human, with the former relegated to a secondary, supplementary status. Once again, one of the most elementary techniques

offers one the most illuminating examples: doors. In a recent essay, Siegert – taking his cue from Georg Simmel’s beautiful 1909 essay on ‘Bridge and Door’ (Simmel, 1994) – describes doors as thresholds that create and process the distinction between inside and outside. Here we are back to the question raised at the outset: Is the door a part of the inside or the outside? Is that which draws the boundary between nature and culture itself part of nature or culture? It is of course possible to summon the eager spectre of Carl Schmitt and invoke a sovereignty that is of a different order than the distinctions it imposes. But it is more promising to follow the lead of theorists like Siegert (2007: 31–5) and Erhard Schüttzel (2006) and employ the fertile concept of the parasite as developed by Michel Serres. A parasite is not something that comes to prey on already existing structures (like pirates congregating on busy shipping lanes). Rather, the structures as well as what it connects come into being as a result of operations involving the always already present third party. Any act of communication is an act of excluding the third party which thereby both is and is not part of the communication. In the culture-technical approach, this act of excluding the parasitical third has its analogue in the way structures and entities tend to render invisible the constitutive technical operations they arise from.

But to return to immediate anthropological implications. Once you move from doors, gates and portals to fences, pens and corrals – that is, once you consider the elementary cultural techniques of creating enclosed spaces for catching, keeping, and breeding animals – you are creating operative thresholds that effectively generate different species confronting each other across that divide. Humans did not come about on their own; we are not a Münchhausen species able to pull ourselves out of our pre-hominid swamp by our own hair. The human is not human all the way down. Instead we emerged, quite literally, from doors and gates while domesticated animals – in opposition to which we were able to identify ourselves as a species – 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)

Once again, cultural techniques refer to processing operations that frequently coalesce into entities which are subsequently viewed as the agents or sources running these operations. Procedural chains and connecting techniques give rise to notions and objects that are then endowed with essentialized identities. Underneath our ontological distinctions (if not even our own

evolution) are constitutive, media-dependent ontic operations that need to be teased out by means of techno-material deconstruction.

But with quotes like the one above, the German study of the cultural techniques of hominization is targeting an area of research that is also of crucial interest to concurrent development in the North American post-humanities: the co-evolution of humans and technology. Cultural techniques are also anthropotechnics. Leaving aside the conspicuous Heidegger-based similarities to Bernard Stiegler, it is possible – and, above all, very interesting – to draw connections between the work of Siegert, Schüttpelz and Vismann on the one hand and that of David Wills, Cary Wolfe, Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway on the other (further see Winthrop-Young, 2009). Yet once again, Siegert is quick to draw a dividing line:

While the American side pursues a deconstruction of the anthropological difference with a strong ethical focus, the Germans are more concerned with technological or medial fabrications or artifices. From the point of view of the cultural techniques approach, anthropological differences are less the effect of a stubborn anthropo-phallo-carno-centric metaphysics than the result of culture-technical and media-technological practices... Human and non-human animals are always already recursively intertwined because the irreducible multiplicity and historicity of the anthropological is always already processed by cultural techniques and media technologies... 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 exorcised from humans is simply transferred onto animals which now appear as the better humans.

Others may want to debate the validity of this distinction or try their hand at reconciling the competitive enterprises; we are more concerned with identifying what is behind the insistence on this mid-Atlantic divide. The emphasis on media-technological practices and medial fabrications, the reference to sentimentality, and the impatience with rituals of deconstruction that do not include an informed technological focus – where does this come from? Where have we heard similar appeals? There are several sources (Heidegger inevitably comes to mind), but it is not difficult to pinpoint the most obvious one.

### **Kittler Determines Our Situation**

The papers contained in this issue were written over the last decade, with the earliest (Krämer and Bredekamp) dating back to 2003. The temporal

frame thus largely coincides with a decade that witnessed not only the rapid institutional rise of cultural techniques research in Germany, but also the internationalization of so-called German media theory – a cluster of work commonly associated with the late Friedrich Kittler. Kittler, no doubt, casts a long shadow over this issue, which in many respects is a sequel to the 2007 *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue dedicated to his work. It is no coincidence that several of our contributors were at one point or another his students or collaborators. The title of Bernard Geoghegan's contribution, 'After Kittler', is particularly apposite. In German it would be '*Nach Kittler*' – *nach* means both 'after' and 'according to'. But *nach* or according to Kittler, what should come *nach* or after him? Furthermore, to speak of a time 'after' Kittler implies the drawing of a line beyond which he did not venture. Is there such a line? Or is it maybe more of a moving frontier? However, we should not overrate Kittler. As Parikka points out, you cannot lay all of the recent cultural techniques scholarship at Kittler's doorstep. Much of it has little to do with him; a lot would meet with his disapproval. Nonetheless, to fine-tune our opening question: cultural techniques can be better understood when viewed as the response to questions or quandaries that arose from media-theoretical work best represented by Kittler's contributions.

One of the more peculiar qualities of Kittler's media-theoretical work is the uneasy juxtaposition of a wealth of detailed case studies and the ongoing insistence on the impact of historically changing 'discourse networks' on the one hand, and a reluctance to define medium and/or media on the other. Students learn a lot about the operations and effects of media but less so what media are. This feature is related to the fact that in Kittler's theory the term 'media' appears to operate in at least three different registers. First, it denotes a new *object of study*. Those who once interpreted texts are now scrutinizing phonographs, typewriters, and computers. Second, as Siegert will discuss in greater detail, it denotes a new *approach* to old objects of study: the usual repository of established disciplinary phantoms – body, mind, sense, senses, meaning, truth, communication, consciousness, etc. – are now dissected as thoroughly mediated constructs. Third, it is a *rhetorical device* itching for a good fight. Especially in the anti-humanist heyday from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, it is a polemically deployed counter-term carrying a volatile anti-hermeneutic charge. *Media*, then, is many things, ranging from a verbal club liberally applied to those stuck in old meaning-seeking paradigms to a kind of conceptual defamiliarization tool designed to break the narcotic spell deviantly servile technologies cast on their users.

Such conceptual fracturing has its consequences. With the spread and institutionalization of media theory its ability to shake up minds and disciplines was bound to diminish. Prolonged provocation inevitably devolves into nonproductive tedium, especially if recycled within the safety of established academic programs. Not coincidentally, the last

couple of years have witnessed a small but significant deployment of titles in which the existence of media is either referred to in the past tense (e.g. Pias, 2011) or denied (e.g. Siegert, 2003; Horn, 2007). This is not only a reflection of the technological issue that, as Kittler would have it, the digitization of channels and information 'will erase the very concept of medium' (Kittler, 1999: 2); it also signals the abdication of *media* as a cutting-edge conceptual shibboleth. Unfortunately, this has not prevented some of Kittler's more dedicated and hence less original disciples to continue to write like it's 1999 and indulge in ever more detailed readings of ever more arcane technologies. Media theory can forfeit its relevance in many ways; one of the safest is to engage in increasingly stale artifactualism.

But how to escape the narrowing tunnel? One response – and one which deserves greater attention in the Anglosphere – has been the rise of *Medienphilosophie* or media philosophy. In contributions by scholars such as Sybille Krämer or Dieter Mersch, the basic gesture is to move from *media* (and all the overly artifactual, instrumental and/or determinist connotations the term has accumulated) to *mediality*, though without abandoning the crucial Kittlerian lessons gained from scrutinizing the former. Media philosophy reflects on the generalizations derived from the preceding medium-specific studies and attempts a definition of mediality, yet it refuses to reacquire the instrumental naivety or techno-centric assumptions of bygone theory decades. One of the core points is to provide an account of mediality as something that belongs neither to the perceiving subject nor the perceived object and which, as a third, enables perception by removing itself from perception (for a short introduction see Mersch, 2006: 219–28).

This is very similar to an understanding of cultural techniques as a 'third' obscured by what emerges from its operations. As Geoghegan will discuss in greater detail, the ascendancy of *Kulturtechniken* may be seen as a response to some of the problems and potential cul-de-sacs of Kittler's media theory. The pronounced anti-humanism in combination with the scorn Kittler heaped on nebulous constructs like 'society' may have been a necessary inoculation against the instrumentalist, anthropocentric or technically uninformed ways of dealing with the materialities of storage and communication, but by the mid-1990s, when Kittler's own apocalyptic anti-humanism had passed its peak, it too had run its course. Here the culture-technical approach offers a viable alternative or escape route. To speak of operations and connections allows those inspired by the Kittler effect to speak of practices without saying society; to readmit human actors allows them to speak of agency without saying subjects; and to speak of recursions allows them to speak of history without implying narratives of continuity or social teleology. Among other things the third meaning of cultural techniques is an answer to questions raised by Kittler's work.



Of course there is an alternative, which, to put it bluntly, comes with an interesting bid to out-Kittler Kittler. As Parikka has emphasized, this is most clearly on display in the media-archaeological work of Wolfgang Ernst (further see Parikka, 2011). While Markus Krajewski's contribution on service as a cultural technique combines *human* servants (Jeeves) and *electronic* servers (AskJeeves.com) by establishing recursive connections between the two, Ernst discusses the more radical perspective that these recursive operations are exclusively composed of inter-machinic processes proceeding in machine time. This is not the end of history, yet it marks the awareness of a machine history that needs to be told – if it can be told at all – in ways that radically depart from human historiography (further see Winthrop-Young, 2013). Here, the *Technik* in *Kulturtechnik* clearly gains the upper hand. To offer one of those irresponsible generalizations that come easily to outside observers, it appears that, like Hegel, to whom he is occasionally compared, Kittler has inspired a bifurcation into right and left Kittlerians. Nothing, we suggest, reveals this division more than applying the concept of cultural techniques to his work. Scholars like Siegert, Vismann and Krajewski would qualify as left Kittlerians: his anti-hermeneutic stance is transformed by them into a less intransigent post-hermeneutic approach involving certain notions of praxis and limited human agency that Kittler was prone to eschew. Ernst, on the other hand, would be a right Kittlerian by subordinating whatever human element may be involved in cultural techniques to the closed times and circuits of technological recursions.

## Overview

To reflect the issues sketched above, we have divided the collection into two parts made up of four papers each (excluding these preliminary remarks and Parikka's Afterword). The first part contains introductions and historical accounts. It leads off with a short paper by Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, 'Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques: Moving beyond Text', originally published in 2003. It represents the first systematic attempt to provide, in point form, a concise summary of the new concept of cultural techniques, and it comes with the appeal that the use of the concept should result in moving the study of culture beyond established textual domains, thereby debunking the myth of culture as discourse. Thomas Macho's contribution seeks to fine-tune the concept by restricting cultural techniques to symbolic technologies that allow for self-referential recursion. These recursions, in turn, are crucial for the generation of humans as – to quote the title of the paper – 'Second-Order Animals'. Cultural techniques, in short, are first and foremost techniques of identity. The following papers by Bernhard Siegert (who will take issue with Macho's restriction) and Bernard Geoghegan are more retrospective and historical in scope. In his paper 'Cultural



Techniques, or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory', Siegert relates the (re)emergence of the concept to recent changes in both the political and intellectual domain and then proceeds to outline his post-hermeneutic account of *Kulturtechniken* as chains of operations that link humans, things and media. Geoghegan's paper, 'After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory', addresses some of the specific moments in German post-war theory outlined above, but it presents a much wider and more detailed view of the diverse meanings and Kittlerian origins of *Kulturtechnik* than was offered here.

The second part contains papers primarily concerned with applications and implications. As already mentioned, Cornelia Vismann's contribution, 'Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty', probes the implications of cultural techniques for the field of legal philosophy. If cultural techniques connect and thereby define the agency of humans and objects (which in Vismann's famous formulation are objects and subjects, respectively, connected to cultural techniques acting as verbs), it becomes the analyst's task to reverse-engineer this wiring: from the emergent fiction of human sovereignty back to the techniques that enabled it in the first place. Markus Krajewski's contribution, 'The Power of Small Gestures: On the Cultural Technique of Service', offers an intriguing case study that conceptualizes the history of servants and servers as a cultural technique revolving around an increasingly technologized interplay of bodily gestures on the one hand and tools and instruments on the other. Sebastian Vehlken's 'Zootechnologies: Swarming as a Cultural Technique' addresses the way in which cultural techniques are involved in the exploration of swarming, both in the biological and political domain. Finally, Wolfgang Ernst's 'From Media History to *Zeitkritik*' discusses the implications imposed on cultural techniques by the ways in which technical media produce and process their own distinct time. Ernst's discussion has the added bonus of tying together cultural techniques with another very promising current German theory strand, media archaeology. But that is another chapter (see Parikka, 2012; Ebeling, 2012; Ernst, 2013) we hope readers will be encouraged to explore.

## Note

1. Over the years *Kulturtechniken* has been rendered into English as 'cultural technologies', 'cultural techniques' and 'culture technics' (with and without a dash). Leaving aside the differences between *Kultur* and culture as well as the problematic transformation of the noun *Kultur* into the adjective 'cultural', the principal quandary is the word *Technik*. Its semantic amplitude ranges from gadgets, artefacts and infrastructure all the way to skills, routines and procedures – it is thus wide enough to be translated as technology, technique, or technics. *Medientechniken*, for instance, are media technologies rather than

media techniques, but *Körpertechniken* are body techniques rather than body technologies. The corresponding difficulty on the English side is the comparatively narrow range of ‘technology’ which, ironically, is in part a result of the flattening of the term that occurred in the early 20th century in the course of the Anglophone processing of imported German social theories, especially Marxism (further see Schatzberg). We have decided in favour of ‘cultural techniques’. This is not an ideal solution; in some instances it may well be the inferior choice. However, a full understanding of *Kulturtechniken* involves drills, routines, skills, habituations or *techniques* as much as tools, gadgets, artefacts or *technologies*. At rock bottom, *techniques* covers more of *technologies* than vice versa.

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### Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Ernst W (2006) Von der Mediengeschichte zur Zeitkritik. In: Engell L, Siegert B and Vogl J (eds) *Kulturgeschichte als Mediengeschichte (oder vice versa?)*. Weimar: Universitätsverlag, 23–32.

Krämer S and Bredekamp H (2003) Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur. In: Krämer S and Bredekamp H (eds) *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*. Munich: Fink, 11–22.

Macho T (2008) Tiere zweiter Ordnung. Kulturtechniken der Identität. In: Baecker D, Kettner M and Rustemeyer D (eds) *Über Kultur. Theorie und Praxis der Kulturreflexion*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 99–117.

Vismann C (2010) Kulturtechniken und Souveränität. *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 1: 171–181.

Bernhard Siegert's paper, 'Cultural Techniques, or the End of the Intellectual Postwar in German Media Theory', is the introductory essay in a volume on cultural techniques forthcoming from Fordham University Press. We thank the authors and the associated publishers for the rights to translate the essays. We are especially grateful to Balthasar Haussmann for the permission to include Cornelia Vismann's text. It is very fitting that this collection concludes with Liam Young's review essay of her groundbreaking study, *Files: Law and Media Technology*. We wish to dedicate this issue to her memory. As a legal historian, media theorist, teacher, mentor and friend, Cornelia remains an inspiration to us all. We hope that this collection will also persuade more readers to explore her work.

**Geoffrey Winthrop-Young** is Professor of German at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Among his publications are *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge, 2011) and *Friedrich Kittler zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2005), as well as translations of works by Friedrich Kittler, Cornelia Vismann and Eva Horn.

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# Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques – Moving Beyond Text<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Originally published in 2003, this article presents one of the first attempts to provide a systematic summary of the new concept of cultural technique. It is, in essence, an extended checklist aimed at overcoming the textualist bias of traditional cultural theory by highlighting what is elided by this bias. On the one hand, to speak of cultural techniques redirects our attention to material and physical practices that all too often assume the shape of inconspicuous quotidian practices resistant to accustomed investigations of meaning. On the other hand, cultural techniques also comprise sign systems such as musical notation or arithmetical formulas located outside the domain of the hegemony of alphabetical literacy. The rise of the latter in particular is indebted to the impact of the digital – both as a domain of technology and a source of theoretical reorientation. Together, these aspects require a paradigmatic change that challenges and supersedes the traditional ‘discursivism’ of cultural theory.

## Keywords

culture and discourse, cultural studies, cultural techniques, digitization, mathematics, textuality

1. For a long time, perhaps for too long, culture was seen only as text (see Lenk, 1996). Hardly any other trope has had as formative an impact on the culture-theoretical debates of the last decades as this semiotic and structuralist baseline. The metaphor of text dominated until the 1980s,

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