Untimely Mediations: On Two Recent Contributions to 'German Media Theory'

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Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real*, translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 288 pp.

Florian Sprenger, *Medien des Immediaten: Elektrizität, Telegraphie, McLuhan* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2012), 514 pp.

The recent hype over *media archaeology* — an anti-hermeneutic approach to media history that prioritizes the role of instruments, techniques and machines in producing cultural logics — across the United Kingdom and the United States may justifiably be regarded with trepidation by those germanophone scholars most closely identified with the term.[1] For while this turn in the academic spotlight confers much deserved recognition, such celebrated institutionalizations of an intellectual movement often scrub away the history, context and perversions that lent such methods their initial appeal. In the case of the reception of continental thought within the United States and Great Britain, self-appointed arbiters of theoretical taste often dismiss such delays as evidence of the conservative or belated character of anglophone intellectual interests, as though only ideas already dead could be entombed within the theoretical pantheon.

I prefer to understand this temporal dissonance as an instance of the *untimeliness* inherent in the critical enterprise. For Nietzsche, untimely (*unzeitgemäß*) designates a mode of 'acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come'.[2] It develops at crosscurrents to prevailing cultural trends, imagining a future different from our own by discovering vitality in anachronisms. From this point of view, the staggered and irregular

reception of ideas attests to the invigorating promise slumbering in forgotten concepts and faraway cultures. And if Nietzsche is right, untimely ideas may be the only ones capable of intervening against the platitudinous tides of the present. In cultivating unfamiliar and outmoded opinions, the untimely shelters within it the possibility of genuine change.

An appealing aspect of Bernhard Siegert's *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real* and Florian Sprenger's *Medien des Immediaten: Elektrizität, Telegraphie, McLuhan (Media of Immediacy: Electricity, Telegraphy, McLuhan)* is their militant untimeliness.[3] First, although both books might be received in American and British markets as new additions to the German brand of media-archaeological discourse, it's doubtful that either author would show much interest in this trendy designation. Siegert presents his book as a contribution to the field of cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*), a recent germanophone specialization in media and cultural studies dedicated to studying how signs, technology and practice consolidate into durable cultural forms.[4] Although Sprenger shows strong interest in cultural-technical research, his book shows more allegiance to the historical epistemology of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and the poetics of knowledge developed by Joseph Vogl. In the hands of Siegert and Sprenger, these methods offer a critical alternative to media archaeology as it developed in the mid-period work of Friedrich Kittler and more recently in the work of Wolfgang Ernst. Against the media-archaeological determinations of an episteme founded on a well-defined technological a priori, Siegert and Sprenger offer micro-analyses of technology and practice 'in action', to borrow a phrase from an author cited prominently in both books, Bruno Latour.

Another untimely aspect of these books is the authors' relative disinterest in contemporary or recent media technologies. References made to digital media seem cursory, at best. Other recognizable media platforms from the last century such as broadcasting and cinema do not feature prominently. The notable exceptions in Sprenger seem to prove the point: he offers more than a hundred formidable pages dedicated to telegraphy, yet the actual telegraphic device that sits on a desk and sends signals is almost entirely absent from his account. Instead, Sprenger examines the experimental, legal, corporate and juridical networks that confer technical stability on that apparatus. Likewise, the one hundred and fifty pages Sprenger devotes to *Elektrizität* focus on the difficult labour of designing apparatuses and theories capable of defining this elusive force. Rather like Kafka's Odradek,

'media' as understood by Sprenger and Siegert refers to a liminal force that lays down distinctions and boundaries while itself eluding those distinctions.

Becoming-outmoded should not be mistaken for becoming irrelevant: the persistence of untimely and archaic notions is among the major motifs of Sprenger's *Media of Immediacy*. He investigates how the basic fact of communication — that is, that things in one place seem to reappear in another — has presented a philosophical conundrum since antiquity. Sprenger joins Plato's early suspicions of media supplementation to Aristotle's insistency on the necessity of mediation and modulation in all physical things to establish a paradox in Western thought: the desire for im-*media*-cy drives the development of technologies of *media*-tion. This conundrum, formulated as a paradox, is wrapped in an additional veil of mystery: successful communications raise the spectre of a something appearing in multiple places at once, thereby calling into question the very identity of that which is communicated. Sprenger restores to these mundane facts of communication the force of philosophical and scientific anxiety they excited for centuries across Western European and North American salons and laboratories. In analyses of electricity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as telegraphy in the nineteenth century, Sprenger demonstrates how the paradoxes of communication generate occult and irrational notions within science and engineering. According to Sprenger, the desire for immediacy leads individuals to suppress or ignore the material conditions of mediation. Sprenger sees the culmination of this trend in Marshall McLuhan's mystically inflected vision of a 'global village' united by electrical communications.

Sprenger is at his best in his lengthy examinations of the *Wissensordnungen* or knowledge-dispositions embedding early experiments in electricity and telegraphy. Although historians such as David Nye and Carolyn Marvin have already examined aspects of electricity and the technological sublime from various points of view, Sprenger eschews their concern for popular culture in favour of tracing out the material logics that develop among laboratories, instruments, physical theories and patents. The major bookends for his analysis are, on the one hand, wonder within early modern scientific experimentation and, on the other hand, the aforementioned media mysticism of Marshall McLuhan. The most significant downside to Sprenger's wide scope are the limits it establishes on his ability to specify in detail the meaning of immediacy within a situated historical

context. His identification of a golden thread running from the ancient Athenians to Marshall McLuhan likewise limits opportunities for telling cross-cultural histories that might contribute additional insights. Sprenger takes substantial care to mitigate any ahistoricism by filling his case studies with thick historical description, but scholars attuned to interregional and vernacular contributions to the history of science could find additional case studies to enrich the outlines of the narrative offered here.

Bernhard Siegert's *Cultural Techniques* collects essays published between 2001 and 2011 that illustrate his distinct approach to research in the broader field of cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*). These essays examine diverse dispositions of signs, techniques and practices that mediate and distinguish cultural oppositions such as human/animal, self/other, and signal/noise. Siegert is primarily interested in instances of communication, filtering and modulation as they happen beyond well-defined media technologies. For Siegert, legal testaments, drafting techniques and table manners are among the cultural techniques that he suggests offer insights into media history.

Siegert categorizes his case studies as investigations into 'the materiality of the signifier', a term he borrows from Lacan. He also includes numerous citations from other founding fathers of francophone structuralism, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. It's clear why he finds such inspiration in these sources, as few theorists offered such powerful conceptual armaments for reducing vast cultural complexity to elementary, machine-like diagrams of opposition and distinction. Yet the vast and sprawling networks of machines and codes that cut across language, word, body and object in this book seem more reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari, who argued that the despotic logocentricism of the Lacanian signifier must be toppled to allow for the articulation of transversal chains cutting across animal, plant, tool and human.[5] The bold notion at the centre of this book — that cultural techniques articulate the Real (as opposed to the Symbolic or the Imaginary) — illustrates this post-Lacanian embrace of asignifying and non-linguistic elements as active elements within cultural order. For example, in an extended meditation on table manners in chapter two, titled 'Eating Animals — Eating God — Eating Man', Siegert writes, 'sharing the meal is not a conventional sign but a symbol in the Real'. Exchange, belonging and participation are fundamental determinations lodged within the cultural techniques of eating that actually dispose real things in the world, rather than signs referring to those things. A few of Siegert's other examples of cultural techniques

include philosophers' oppositions between human and animal speech ('*Parlêtres*', chapter three), seafaring practices ('Medusas of the Western Pacific', chapter four), and drafting techniques ('(Not) in Place', chapter six).

A common thread in these case studies is boundaries that put the essence of human identity into question by confronting it with a form of alterity that must be incorporated, expelled, or brought into uneasy cohabitation. To be more precise and technical about it, Siegert's case studies suggest that human being (*Dasein*) articulates itself through a strife inherent in the play of ontological difference. This strife demands the construction of distinctions that produce human identity and cultural differences. Siegert assigns the name 'cultural techniques' to this production and maintenance of difference.

The great phantasm of untimeliness haunting Siegert's book is different in kind from that of Sprenger. At its core, Siegert's work is a study of techniques of synchronization and desynchronization among cultures, spaces and species, including occidental and oriental difference ('Cacography or Communication', chapter one), legitimate and illegitimate subjects of the state ('*Pasajeros a Indias*', chapter five) and the distinctions between humans and their animal counterparts ('*Parlêtres*', chapter three). In each instance, the deployment of cultural techniques to produce identity in one group simultaneously produces desynchronization vis-à-vis the excluded group. This synchronization of desynchronization always relies on a third term, namely the cultural-technical apparatus responsible for its maintenance and reproduction. This style of analysis suggests that well-maintained untimeliness is the condition of possibility for human being. It also sets Siegert's work off from an earlier iteration of apocalyptic media theory that warned of global cybernetic technologies gradually effacing all traces of human cultural singularity. The histories sketched by *Cultural Techniques* suggest that every technical advance consolidates and reproduces new ensembles of cultural difference. Here, life itself is lodged within a system of differences that defy resolution and remain perpetually open to strategic redistribution.

An oversight of this volume — and one that ties it to the classical legacies of German or Kittlerian media archaeology — is its tendency to identify cultural differentiation with the respectable officials of *Wissenschaft*, the state and engineering. In Siegert's account, mapmakers, philosophers, functionaries, artists and star architects provide 'the hand, the eye, and the signs' (as well as the tools) that draw cultural-technical distinctions. In another context, he explains

these methodological presuppositions by concisely stating 'the map *is* the territory'.[6] In a certain historical and tautological sense, this is of course true: states produce maps and deploy them decisively to maintain and produce their territory. But surely there is more than one map, just as there is more than one territory, and these alter-territories are often articulated with resources outside officially sanctioned *Wissenschaft*, philosophy and the arts. The repeated invocations Siegert makes to barbarians and nomads as figures produced by cultural techniques indicates his sensitivity to the political privileges lodged in any given map. Yet in the account he offers here, barbarians are produced yet never producing. A history of the nomad and barbarian as producers of territories and maps transversal to the state would constitute an important extension of contemporary research in cultural techniques.

I would like to note by way of conclusion that, in spite of their salutary untimeliness, in certain respects these are profoundly timely books: their patient attention to forgotten technologies, neglected instruments and antiquated epistemologies offers a vision of mediation in the wild, before that strange historical interregnum known as 'the mass media' divided communication into three or four major platforms. Siegert's and Sprenger's histories invite us to inhabit worlds where micro-techniques structure every local interaction, often with global implications for culture and power. As such, both of these books prove invaluable for reflecting on the post-media conditions of the twenty-first century.[7] As digital convergence fractures a few distinct media into hundreds of devices, thousands of channels and millions of 'apps', traditional histories of radio, television and film seem ever more untimely. The methodologies of Sprenger and Siegert provide ample resources for delineating this emerging horizon of mediation without media.

NOTES

1   This review is dedicated to the editor who championed the publication of Siegert's *Cultural Techniques* in English, the late Helen Tartar. The publishers kindly supplied a draft copy of this volume for review; page numbers were not yet finalized, so have not been given here.

2   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, edited by Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.

3   Excerpts from the Sprenger volume are available in English translation for free download at http://bernardg.com/blog/florian-sprenger-media-immediacy.

4   On cultural techniques, see Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Cultural Techniques: Preliminary Observations', *Theory, Culture & Society* 30:6 (2013), 3–19; and Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, 'After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society* 30:6 (2013), 66–82.

5   For more on this critique, see Henning Schmidgen, *Das Unbewußte der Maschinen: Konzeptionen des Psychischen bei Guattari, Deleuze und Lacan* (Munich: Fink, 1997), 127–40.

6   Bernhard Siegert, 'The Map *is* the Territory', *Radical Philosophy* 169 (September/October 2011), 13–16.

7   On post-media, see *Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology*, edited by Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry Slater, Anthony Iles and Oliver Schultz (Lüneberg: PML Books, 2013).

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