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### Introduction

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# Introduction

Andrew J.M. Irving & Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst

The year 2022 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies. To celebrate our anniversary, we organized an expert meeting on the topic of ‘Ritual Techniques: New Openings in Ritual and Liturgical Studies’. We invited scholars from different disciplines to share preliminary findings of their studies on ‘Ritual Techniques’. A fruitful discussion during the expert meeting helped exploring the concept of Ritual Techniques. Articles developed from the expert meeting together with articles that were submitted after a Call for Papers are part of this jubilee edition of the *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies*.

The *Yearbook* aims to sketch new directions in the study of contemporary and historical ritual and liturgy. In this volume,

we will explore how to think about what rituals do, what they make possible, and how. So, instead of probing what rituals mean, or their significance in a secular or post-secular society, we ask ourselves how rituals can be fruitfully explored as ‘Ritual Techniques’. How can rituals be fruitfully explored as techniques, i.e., operational processes involving work with things and symbols which entail both “know-how” and “know-that”? Practices-with-things both regularize and habituate the body’s movements, on the one hand, and can provide a basis for new spaces for perception, communication, and cognition on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The theme ‘Ritual Techniques’ is inspired by ‘Cultural techniques’, as used in German media theory. The rise of German media theory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, associated with the names of, among others, Friedrich Kittler, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Bernhard Siegert, responded critically to discursive and psychoanalytic modes of analysis of culture. *Kulturhistorische Medienanalyse* proposes the replacement of the dominance of “text”, “understanding” and “meaning” in cultural analysis with what Gumbrecht termed “the materialities of communication”.<sup>2</sup> This critique entailed a number of shifts (Siegert 2015, 2–3):<sup>3</sup>

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1) Call for Papers for this jubilee edition, <https://www.pthu.nl/irilis/news-events/news/2021/11/call-for-papers-jubilee-edition-yearbook-for-ritual-and-liturgical-studies/>. Accessed September 29, 2022.

2) Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Flache Diskurse,” *Materialität der Kommunikation*, Ed. H.U. Gumbrecht and K. L. Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 914–23, 919.

3) Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, Transl. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2-3.

- from Foucault’s historical a priori to a technological a priori;
- from a concern for the representation of meaning to the material and technological conditions of representation;
- from a concern regarding the priority of the written (or the oral) to an analysis of the material conditions of the practices of communication
- from ontology and from hermeneutics to an historical analysis of material practices
- from asking “what does this mean”, to asking “how does it work” or what are the material conditions that enable it to work, in a way that processually shapes the possibility of meaning.

“Cultural techniques” (*Kulturtechniken*) are an important unit of analysis in this theoretical approach. They have been defined as “concrete sets of practices, knowledge, and skills enabling work with things and symbols, habituating and regularising the body’s movements, and expressing themselves in everyday, fluid practices” (Krämer & Bredekamp 2013, 271). Grides, typewriters, doors, registers, and even Communion have all been analyzed as cultural techniques. As Siegert writes: “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”.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of this volume draws inspiration from these developments. On the one hand, since at least the twelfth century, Christian theology has explored ways in which a (sacred) thing can do what it says (*signum efficax*); and recent scholarship has problematized assumptions of inefficacy in what it is that we mean when we use the word “ritual” (e.g., Sax, Quack & Weinhold 2010).<sup>5</sup> On the other, media theory’s eschewal of all too neat distinctions between first order technologies and second order symbols, its argument that the human is not the only subject of culture, and its proposal that we attend to operational chains that both shape the media that they generate, and also destabilize and deterritorialize cultural codes, symbols, sounds, and images, has clear resonances and implications for the analysis of religious ritual and liturgical objects, texts and practices, as they evolve from the past, in the present, and into the future.

In this *Yearbook*, ‘ritual techniques’ are approached in different ways. Barnard, rereading Krämer and Bredekamp’s article “Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques”, asks how “we understand, interpret, and evaluate the notion that symbol and technology interpenetrate and that their functional processes can mutually substitute for one another.” In her article on the Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical Liturgy of Lund, 2016, Belcher “analyzes how rituals of reconciliation effectively negotiate between competing factions and norms by using ritual techniques as embodied symbols.” Larson-Miller, using the example of funeral rituals amongst the Swampy Cree of Manitoba, Canada, suggests that “ac-

4) Idem, 9.

5) See, for example, William Sax, Johannes Quack and Jan Weinhold (Ed), *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

culturation, rather than inculturation, may be, for certain cultures and liturgies, the preferred ritual pattern, a ritual technique to continue two identities in the midst of diversity, especially in Christian communities who live in the ongoing reality of the move from colonialism to postcolonialism.” Smit introduces the theoretical perspective of ‘prefigurative politics’ and argues “that the early Christian meal can be understood as a cultural technique that enables new knowledge and insight”

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