

Mona Mahall and Asli Serbest

Wolf and Vampire: The Border Between Technology and Culture

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Today, common sense tells us that the border between technology (formerly known as nature) and culture is a fluid one. It is common to describe technology as a cultural practice, or culture as a fabric of interwoven material, intellectual, and social techniques. Of course, there is an obvious interrelation between culture and technology in terms of method, media, and material, and it is not difficult to identify the technical aspects of texts, or the cultural implications of communication technologies, and so forth. This interrelation of culture and technology, however, is actually based on their separation, a border that is – insofar as we can perceive it – fundamental to modernity. The separation has nothing to do with objects or disciplines, with established criteria or genera, with groups or institutions. Rather, it is sharp but unstable – it is mobile, flashing here and there between form and function, between architecture and building.

The latest attempts to reconcile culture and technology had been preceded – over the last 250 years – by antagonist attempts at playing them off: on the one hand, there was the pessimistic tragedy of culture in a technical world, and, on the other, the optimism of continuous scientific and technological progress. For some, this meant the antagonism of German culture and French civilization. Or, as the Swiss historian Siegfried Giedion put it, the split between feeling and thinking in modernity.¹ Naturally, reunion attempts have been brought forward most seriously in the field of architecture. For Giedion, who trained as an engineer and an art historian, this was a life's work. Born in Bohemia in 1888, Giedion recognized modern architecture as the perfect field to start with; as a pupil of Heinrich Wölfflin, he immediately recognized that this work would revolutionize the visual culture of the industrial age.² He became familiar with the Weimar Bauhaus in 1923 and read Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, published that year. When he traveled to Paris in 1925, he was drawn to modern culture as it was reflected in the artistic and architectural avant-gardes. He wanted to be part of it: interpreting the developments in architecture in his own terms, Giedion became an ally – the spokesman and the historian of the modern movement, and even the first secretary-general of the famous Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Hans Magnus Enzensberger described his career as “extraordinary” – instead of giving lectures, he visited the Surrealists' ateliers; he was at once a researcher, entrepreneur, technician, journalist, organizer, historian, reporter, and archeologist. In general, his work might be offensive to contemporary professors.³ And it actually is.

Thinking and Feeling

Giedion's theoretical work began with an observation of his time as being schizoid, divorcing technology and culture, or, more precisely, science and art. It is a time in which thinking and feeling oppose each other, a time in which scientific discovery is of no significance. It is a time in which a physical theory does not have an artistic equivalent, in which scientists and artists have finally lost touch with each other – though they may share a contemporary language in their works, they cannot recognize it in a field other than their own. Giedion claims that a great physicist will not be able to understand a painting that equals his own ideas within a different form. Today's painter does not understand contemporary architecture, and the poet ignores the music of his day. For Giedion, the divorce of thinking and feeling is rooted in the unevenness of scientific and artistic progress in the early nineteenth century, when feeling could not compete with the pace of thinking, which was advancing rapidly, and scientific achievements were regarded as neutral in terms of their emotional meaning. Important achievements had no bearing on inner life, and mechanization took command.⁴ The result of these developments is the "split personality" of the modern mind, which separates thinking and feeling. Even more scandalous than the divorce of culture and technology in the nineteenth century was a repression of artistic imagination, in which art assumed the form of eclecticism – separated from the creative power of the epoch and maneuvered into the grotesque "reign of the upholsterer."⁵

As a cultural critic, Giedion could have concluded his analysis at this point, but as an advocate for modern art and architecture, this only marked the beginning of an approach that appears to be a reunion attempt – at first glance. Here "movement" becomes a key word for a problem supposedly shared by both modern technology and culture, insofar as both are symbols of everlasting change, of the movement of history itself. Beginning with the Gothic cathedrals that marked the end of the ancient equilibrium, the "stream of movement" was actuated by the introduction of the mathematical variable by Descartes.

The most important step in representing movement and change was made by nineteenth-century scientists such as the French physiologist Étienne Jules Marey, who concentrated on the investigation of movements in all kind of forms: in the bloodstream, muscle, and gait, as well as the movements of birds, aquatic animals, salamanders, and insects. Giedion was fascinated by the strange forms

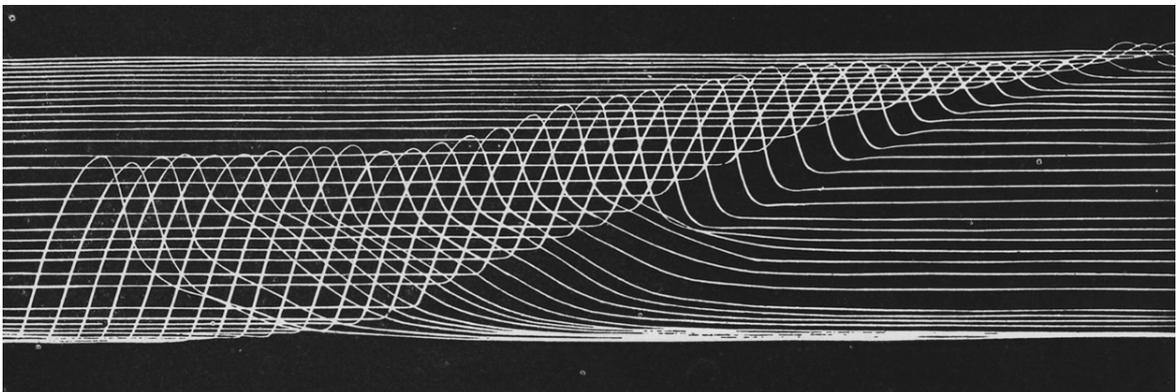
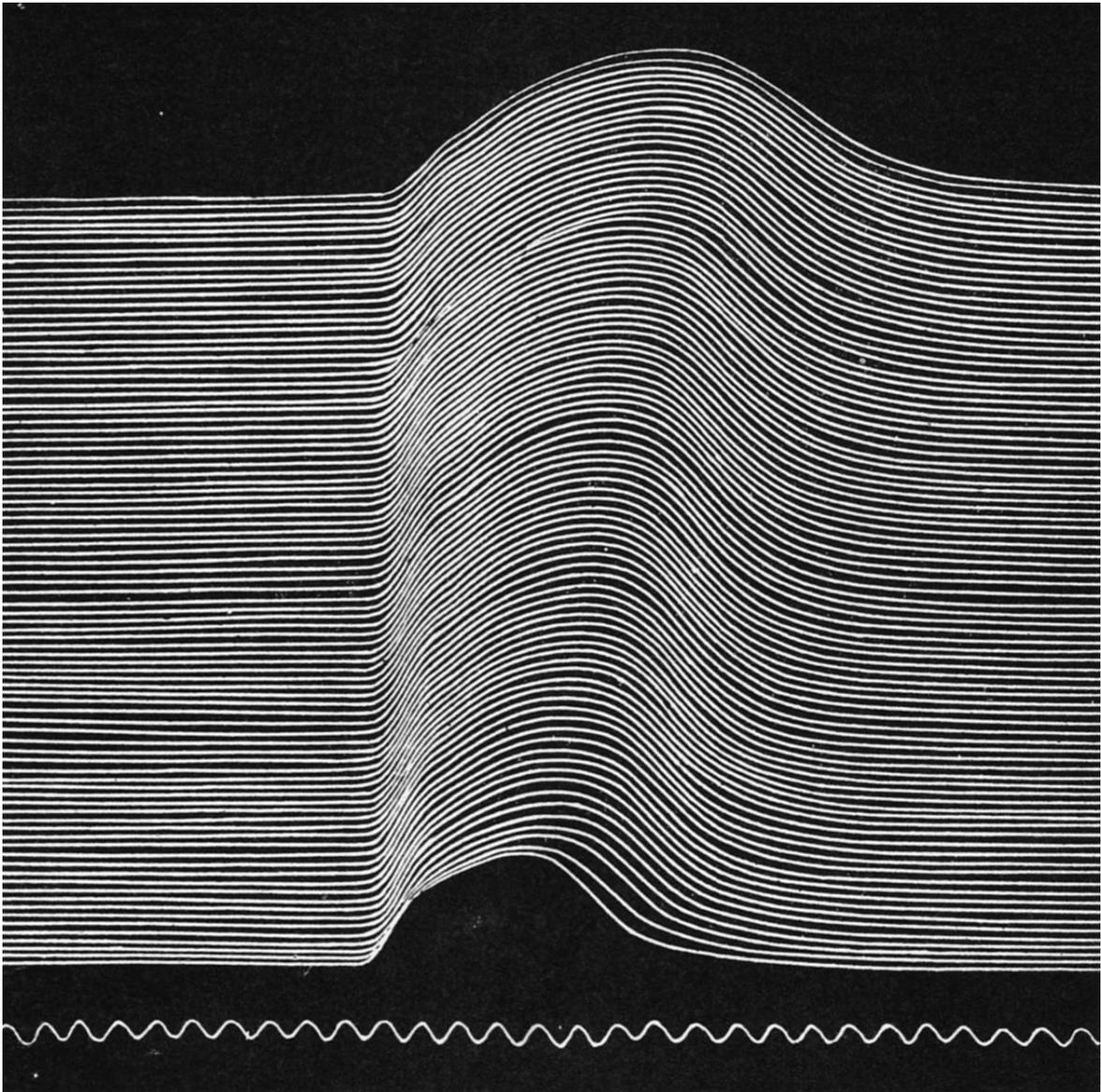
drawn by Marey's recording apparatus, registering the quasi-automatic "language of the phenomena themselves."⁶ He was inspired by the models Marey created to show the three-dimensional character of the gull's flight – a "sculpture that," according to Giedion, "would have delighted [Umberto] Boccioni, creator of the *Bottle Evolving in Space* (1912) and the *Marching Man* (1913)."⁷ But it was only in the field of scientific management at the beginning of the twentieth century that images of pure movement could be recorded with full precision and perfection, and for Giedion the work of production engineer Frank B. Gilbreth suggested the visualization of the invisible: an empire of new forms enabled by a technology that could detach human motion from its subject in order to visualize it, or, one could say, appropriate it.

Motion, the ever changing, is the key to modern thinking, and its place within the arena of feeling is of concern for modern art, which can show the effects of mobility or mechanization on the inner existence of humankind. But Giedion insists upon the reverse: mechanization itself has entered the modern artists' subconscious. Giorgio de Chirico dreamed that his father became one with the demonic power of the machine; Fernand Léger painted the city as signs, signals, and mechanical parts; and Marcel Duchamp rendered the most efficient machines as irrational, ironic objects in order to introduce a new aesthetic language. Giedion was certain that artists included machines, mechanical devices, and prefabricated objects in their work because these were the only real products of their time. Mechanization, for Giedion, represented the impulse of a general historical movement – as a synonym of movement, actually, and of the universal continuum of historical change.

Yet it was modern artists who first taught Giedion to study modernity's objects carefully. They taught him to observe the small things, the fragments, as they best exhibited the feelings and habits of an epoch. He acknowledged the artists' lesson as he learned to consider small things on a large scale, or, we might say: to turn anonymous things into authored ones, or to turn an anonymous history into a tradition. This is the manner in which Giedion considered the overall paradigm of movement in both modern culture and technology, paralleling the hammock with Alexander Calder's mobiles to expose the unifying principle that holds them together.⁸ Both originate in the American environment, though Calder, like Giedion, gained aspects of his formal vocabulary from the European avant-garde. Still, Calder's originality is rooted in American life, which has always been influenced by technical invention. To Giedion, however, this

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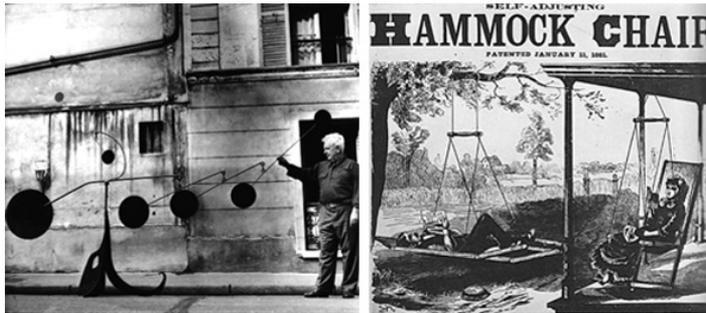
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Etiennes-Jules Marey, *Record of the Movement of a Muscle*, as found in Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*. Above: Responses of the frog's leg to stimulation by an electric current. Below: Coagulation of the muscle and gradual loss of function as the effect of rising temperature.

spirit of invention was silent in terms of feeling, as it had not been interpreted artistically. Only in 1931, with his kinetic “mobiles,” did Calder merge the typical American relation to the machine with a modern means of expression that achieved a “sensitivity to states of equilibrium.” Giedion’s achievement was in observing this process, for he was the first to recognize the interdisciplinary signs of an evolutionary history of movement. Or, more precisely (and also more trivially), he recognized objects that move as representations of a history that also moves on its own accord. The mobile thereby became the model of the existential equilibrium between technology and culture, between thinking and feeling, that Giedion set out to restore.

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Right: Alexander Calder, *Myxomatose*, 1953. Left: *The Hammock and Covertibility: Hammock Chair*, 1881. Image found in Giedion’s *Mechanization takes Command*.

Anonymous and Author

The figure of the equilibrium not only manifests the separation of culture and technology, but also shows its center of gravity – the border between culture and technology – as dynamic or mobile, depending on its counterweights. Giedion shifted these weights easily, moving between culture and technology from one sentence to the next. And he was totally aware of his role: unlike historians, who cannot create a notion of the continuity of history, he recognized his authorial role by taking a creative approach towards a past that always projects into the future.

For Giedion, history is dynamic: no generation is able to fully comprehend an artwork, so every new generation discovers new aspects of it. Yet in order to reveal these aspects, the historian must be as courageous as the artist. Historians, according to Giedion, usually mistrust contemporary methods, as they must necessarily guard the independence and scope of their observations. But in doing so, they neglect the importance of being of their time, of knowing which questions must be put to the past in order to resonate with the present, instead producing a “wilderness of unrelated facts” that replace mediation with chronology and

specialization.⁹ Going further, Giedion stated that the historian cannot be distinguished from the stream of the present, and that the ideal historian, divorced from his or her own time, is no more than a fiction. In this sense, history is itself a continuous process that includes life, and any view into history must necessarily alter the past according to the nature of the viewer. To observe something means to turn it into something else.

When Giedion then speaks of an “anonymous history,” he looks to the tools of mechanization, turning them into objects of historical observation – an observation that uses movement to turn technology into a cultural vision. And Giedion is its author. It is not a sort of “history from the bottom up” – if something like this exists at all – nor is it a research into a material world, or a history that ignores names. Nor is it a history that gives names to the anonymous. Rather, it is a history linked to one single name: Giedion. It is not a kind of interdisciplinary bridging or balancing, but an “authorization,” an operation along a sharp frontier that converts anonymous to authored, history to tradition. In this sense, he acts more as an engineer or builder than a historian or scientist. The most important aspect of Giedion’s work is not that he acknowledged artists and scientists to be unconsciously working on parallel tracks and pursuing similar goals, but that he was the one to reveal the unconscious parallelism; to analyze the way in which matter, space, and time intermingle; to observe the contributions of modern art to these topics; and to observe that the “cosmos is beginning to resemble more one great thought than a big machine.”¹⁰

In this sense, Giedion’s prelude to *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete* can be seen as stage direction for the ensuing play.¹¹ It introduces a new approach to images within the book, which are treated as a separate narrative, concerned with forming “a new optical language.” Applying the strategies of the avant-garde in order to establish history as an “eternal present,” his publications are all adventurously alienated historical speculations by an author who wanted to exhibit the novelty of his construction.¹² In his earlier works, Giedion is influenced by Dada and Surrealist collage and montage techniques, and he wanted to visualize his thoughts in a way that would allow him the liberty to focus on singular phenomena and specific meaningful fragments, while putting others aside. In his later works, he even took up Duchamp’s readymade strategy, in which “an ordinary object [is] elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.”¹³ He showed technical sketches, models, and designs, the documents found in the patent

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office and the company archives as incunabulum of an unrecognized art. In this sense, he was as courageous as the modern artists.

In fact, Giedion was a modern artist. Modern artists recognized that the impact of mechanization was not in the introduction of mobility to formerly immobile objects, or in the “objectification” of what had been perceived as the movement of history – that is, progress. To them, mechanization suggested a mobility that made it possible (and necessary) to pull away from the history of progress altogether. The result of mechanization, for these artists, was then a movement from a pre-modern role as producers to a modern role as authors. As (technical) producers, modern artists would have had to face the machine – the camera, for example – as an opponent. As (cultural) authors, they could use anonymous technology to produce their work, stick to manual work, or introduce readymades. They could do everything or they could do nothing, insofar as their claim to authorship was successful. Of course, this claim exists only as a cultural claim, just as culture exists only as an authorial claim. In other words: technology implies modern culture insofar as production and authorship are no longer the same.

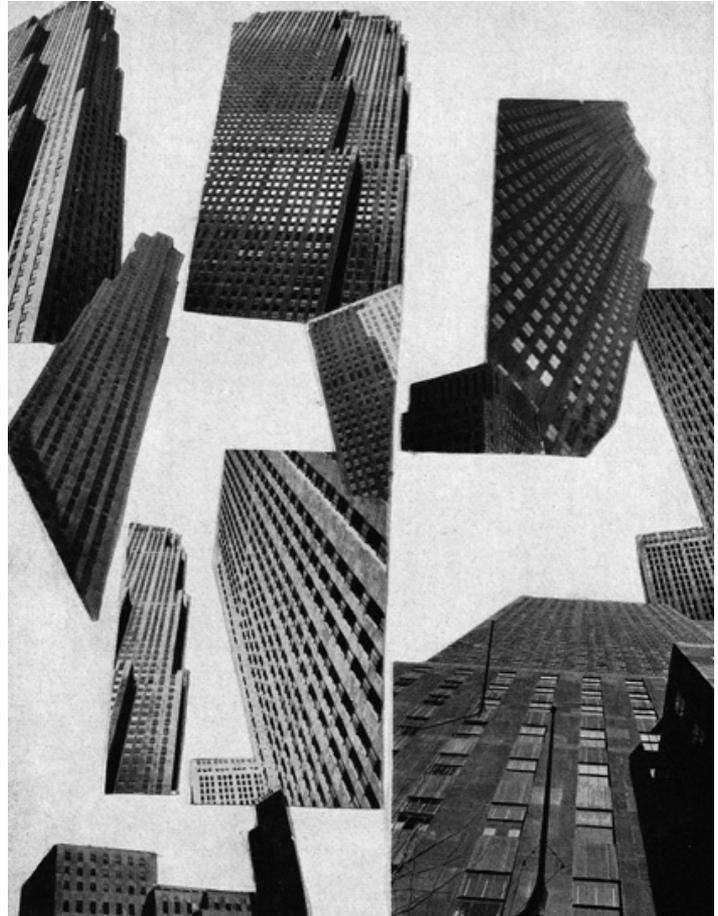
Mobility then becomes the primary means of separating the producer from the author, since authorship is gained through a continuous process that employs production, and vice versa. For Giedion, this process consisted of reconfiguring the border between culture and technology, a border he recognized as dynamic, with the understanding that modern culture means to claim and to imply authorship of anything. Of course, this kind of authorship is not restricted to areas outside of culture, which are later incorporated. It is also a continuous operation within culture itself. Not by chance, Erich Mendelsohn deliberately perceived Giedion’s attempt to incorporate Einstein’s theory of relativity into his works as an invasion of his authorial territory: Mendelsohn had himself made a similar attempt in his Einstein Tower observatory in Potsdam. And even Einstein dismissed Giedion’s *Space, Time, and Architecture* with the following rhyme:

It’s never hard some new thought to declare
If any nonsense one will dare
But rarely do you find that novel babble
Is at the same time reasonable.¹⁴

The art historian Niklaus Pevsner commented on the same work: “This changeover from telling historical truth – the whole truth – to blasting a trumpet, be it ever so rousing a trumpet, is a sin to a historian.”¹⁵ Arguably, the problem was not

that Giedion’s selection of works was too subjective, or that he perverted the truth. Rather, Pevsner, whose work actually faced the same criticism, recognized Giedion’s anonymous history as the direct opposition to his heroic history *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936).

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Sigfried Giedion, *Photomontage of Rockefeller Center*, illustration from *Raum, Zeit, Architektur*, 1941.

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Giedion’s own “heroes” were phantoms, mostly anonymous dead nobodies, whose work could simply be appropriated. To put it more radically, Giedion is the “ideal” modern author, a kind of parasite who subsists on another – “one who eats at the table of another and repays him with flattery and buffoonery.”¹⁶ Giedion literally becomes an author by turning the works of others into his own, not unlike Voltaire’s vampire in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) – a metaphor for the predatory nature of businessmen and stock market traders in Paris and London who suck the blood of the common people. Voltaire also named the clergy, and above all monks, as the true vampires, who sustain themselves at the cost of kings and commoners. Later on, Karl Marx took up the vampire as a metaphor for the capitalist and for capital itself,

with its desire for endless accumulation. It is in this tradition that we call Giedion a kind of vampire, one who provoked a pack of ill-humored wolves: Pevsner, Mendelsohn, and so forth.¹⁷ He was not the vampire of the modern economy, but of modern culture, though the figure of the vampire itself may date back to prehistoric times.¹⁸ It was Lord Byron who recognized the vampire as being a complex and conflicted, lonely and monstrous (anti-)hero: an aristocrat with an aura of the secret and the supernatural who remains “deeply initiated into what is called the world.”¹⁹ Having begun as a relative of the Devil, as a pure representation of evil, the vampire has become the author of his own deeds – with magical abilities, charismatic and sophisticated, undead and spectacular, a Prometheus and cormorant in a single figure.²⁰ The vampire is the modern author caught between life and death by a society that euphemistically calls it a star, knowing this title to be no more than an ambiguous error. The vampire is part of an elitist implication of society: part of a secret society that avoids daylight in order to perform at night, when the spotlights shine like stars.

The vampire is a figure of culture – or better yet, it is a figure that is culture – that, in the field of technology, is always an anachronistic joke or a special effect. The vampire is a figure that does not care about progress, its mode of time is the “eternal present,” to use Giedion’s term again. It is a sovereign that is always regarded with simultaneous skepticism and admiration. A vampire, as Sartre mentioned, is not a figure that can actually legitimately say “I,” or “I did this or that,” because it depends on the affirmation or allocation of others. It was Sartre who recognized the vampire as unstable or mobile in itself, insofar as its self-identification was of a temporary nature.²¹ There is, in this sense, not only an obligation to claim the vampire, but also an obligation for it to be claimed by others. That these others may even kill a vampire from time to time, by beheading and impaling its heart (to ensure the end!), shows the vampire to be a true Giedionian figure of thinking and feeling – a borderline.

Today, the figure of the vampire should not be reduced to the romantic notion of the artist. Rather, it is used to explain the radical difference between authorship and anonymity, between culture and technology (nature) in modernity. It is not the egocentric, passionate, and sensitive Byronic hero that interests us here, although this characterization captures quite well the psychological condition of a vampire. Rather, we recognize in the vampire a metaphor for describing a premise of modern culture: an authorial figure that marks a difference, that

embodies the unstable border between night and day, between culture and technology. Both vampire and author are suspected of not existing. Both are claims and declarations. Both are somehow undead – and spectacular.

By shifting the border between technology/culture and “culturalized” technology to become an author, Giedion aimed at turning modern building into architecture and technology into culture. His attempts to unify culture and technology turned out to be a powerful reconstitution of a separation integral to modern culture. Turning technical progress into cultural historicism, Giedion’s cyclical mode of time resembles that of vampires, who do not grow old, but simply change their clothes according to fashion.²²

All that is successfully associated with the claim of an author becomes culture, whether a painting or a machine. All that enters culture by way of authorship has already left technology. The opposite process, naturalization or anonymization, remains excluded from institutional archives. Still, the border is sharp, and yet, mobile.

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