



Theory
and Media

Kittler and the Media

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young

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INTRODUCTION

Fame, in the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, is no more than the sum of all the misunderstandings that cling to a name. The recent fame of Friedrich Kittler is no exception. To his English-speaking audience he is known either as Germany's leading media theorist or as one of the most influential German proponents of poststructuralism. Sometimes the tags are stitched together and Kittler emerges as the leading German poststructuralist media theorist. An impressive and slightly intimidating label, no doubt, but how accurate is it?

To begin with, Kittler did not start out as a *media* theorist. His early work from the 1970s dealt with literary texts rather than with media technologies. The very words "medium" and "media" hardly occurred, and he never referred to himself as a media theorist. To make matters worse, his most recent work on the evolution of alpha-numerical sign systems appears to place him outside of conventional media studies. But if the young Kittler was not yet a media theorist and the

older Kittler is no longer one (at least, not in the usual sense of the term), how useful is the designation? Concerning the slippery label *poststructuralism*, while Kittler did employ it at the outset of his career (one of his early edited volumes was subtitled “Programs of Poststructuralism”), the term soon disappears. Even worse, it is ridiculed by Kittler, whose work in fact raises doubt whether it should have been used at all. And what about the most troubling tag, *German*? It is a bit of an insult. The overwhelming presence of the Anglo-American academic industry in media and communication studies is such that many anglophone practitioners no longer consider it necessary to situate their work by using national adjectives, yet contributions that originate elsewhere need to be labeled “French,” “German,” or “Japanese.” These appellations do not refer to anything specific to France, Germany, or Japan, but merely serve to indicate that the work in question is *not* English. Nonetheless, the label *German* can and should be applied to Kittler. It does not, however, stand for any essential national characteristic (as if such natural collective attributes existed) but for a discursive context that arose in Germany even before the state bearing that name came into existence. Kittler’s theory is not German because he was born in Germany or writes in German, or because he frequently draws on canonized German names such as Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger. (By the same token, he could be labeled French in light of his indebtedness to Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, American because of his high regard for Claude Shannon and Thomas Pynchon, or even British given his veneration of Alan Turing and Pink Floyd.) He has produced a German theory because the deeper layers of his work, the bias of his arguments and the recurrence of a certain set of references and associations, not to mention the way in which he expresses them, have to be understood against the background of debates about technology, human-

ism, and individual as well as collective identity formation that over the course of the last two centuries emerged in the German-speaking countries.

To simplify matters, this introduction will treat Kittler's work as a sequence made up of three stages. The first stage, which lasted from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, focused on texts, more precisely, on the *discourse analysis* or "archeology" of primarily literary texts. The second stage, which started in the early 1980s and lasted for roughly two decades, concentrated on *media technologies*, first on the new, primarily analog media of the late nineteenth century (phonography, cinematography, the typewriter-induced mechanization of writing) and then on digital technology. While Kittler himself may not be too happy about it, this second, media-based stage is generally regarded to be his most important contribution; it is certainly the most widely translated portion of his work. The third stage, at the center of which is a large-scale, ontologically oriented genealogy of mathematical and musical notation systems, engages *cultural techniques* (*Kulturtechniken*), a complex term greatly in vogue in current German theory that combines an attention to media technologies with a focus on elementary physical and mental skills, including, most prominently, reading, writing, and computing. With this tripartite division in mind, we shall start with a biographical overview that will introduce readers to some of the important connections between Kittler's work and the changing historical, political, and intellectual German environments (chapter 1). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will deal with his analyses of texts, media technologies, and Greek alphanumerical cultural techniques, respectively. Each chapter begins with an opening teaser, that is, with an analysis by Kittler of a short "text" that contains in a nutshell the salient points of that particular stage. These texts have been chosen because each of them constitutes, to introduce the first item

of vintage Kittlerese, a “discourse on discourse channel conditions.” They are messages about their own medium, they discuss and perform their own medial conditions, and are thus highly revealing instances of the media conditions of their day.

Of course, this neat subdivision of Kittler’s career into separate stages should not be taken too seriously. It is a heuristic device employed for didactic purposes. Intellectual growth processes do not resemble geological strata; theories rarely evolve in discontinuous leaps and bounds. Kittler did not simply stop writing about literary texts in the early 1980s; neither has he altogether abandoned media and media theory now. Focusing on the noticeable continuities, rather than on the ruptures, we can just as well describe Kittler’s work as a widening spiral in which similar questions recur, but each time on a more expansive level. The (very ambitious) spatio-temporal expansion is obvious: the “literature stage” focused almost exclusively on German literature from the so-called age of Goethe (1770–1830); the “media stage” expanded the scope to incorporate almost 200 years of media-technological development in Europe and North America; and the recent “cultural techniques” stage aims at nothing less than the whole of occidental history from ancient Greece to the Gutenberg galaxy and beyond into the Turing age. And while each level calls for different concepts and categories, key concerns remain the same – heteronomy, codes, programming, conflict, and the very characteristic Kittlerian tendency to move between intoxication and investigation, or rapture and rule analysis. It is important that students with an interest in media theory keep this in mind when they wade through chapter 2, wondering what on earth all the analyses of love and language, mothers and ministries, family codes and writing lessons have to do with media. Much of what Kittler will have to say later on about media is already

present when he performs his particular discourse analysis of literary texts; and it will remain in place when he takes aim at the singular cultural accomplishments of ancient Greece.

But an important word of caution before we start. Kittler, arguably one of the most complex and baffling contemporary German theorists, is certainly one of the most controversial. He is difficult to read, even more difficult to translate, and almost impossible to discuss without getting mired in the standard objections that accuse him of obscurantism, anti-humanism, techno-determinism, and a faintly Teutonic military fetish. To be sure, he is anything but an innocent target. Kittler generously indulges in provocations and exaggerations, displaying all the gleeful rambunctiousness of a bull that specializes in the destruction of politically correct china shops. In the concluding chapter 5 we will therefore spend a lot of time discussing Kittler's controversial aspects, especially the troublesome three *Ws*: war, women, and writing style. As we shall see, some of the usual objections raised against him are off-target, but nonetheless readers should be cautioned right from the start against certain basic expectations that Kittler most certainly will *not* meet.

Many students of media and communication approach the field with a certain idealism. After all, why study media, why meticulously dissect the ways in which cultures process data, why wrestle with increasingly complex media-theoretical proposals, not to mention the politically fraught issues of media access and ownership, if not with some view toward improving matters? No doubt many readers expect that a focused engagement with a high-profile media theorist will result in some insight into media abuse and provide clues as to how we can curb media manipulation, clear the conduits of communication, fully realize the potential of our technologies, or empower the disenfranchised. The idea that someone would spend decades trying to understand media while neglecting,

denying, at times even ridiculing such aspirations – that idea is difficult to grasp. Kittler is that someone. His work will strike many as profoundly asocial or even ahuman, especially when approached in a more idealistic spirit. In his texts you will rarely encounter the words *Gesellschaft* (society) or *Aufklärung* (enlightenment) without hearing a sneer. *Mensch* – “human” or “man” – is almost always (dis)qualified as *der sogenannte Mensch* (“so-called man”), Kittler prefers the unassuming and in an academic context slightly dismissive *Leute* (“people” or “folks”). This is not because he disapproves of emancipatory socio-political agendas, but because these approaches are in his eyes based on naive conceptualizations of media that do not take into account the degree to which, to quote his most (in)famous opening line, “[m]edia determine our situation” (Kittler 1999: 1) – especially when we believe that we can determine *them* while pursuing our worthy social goals.

The German poet Gottfried Benn, who occupies a prominent seat in Kittler’s personal pantheon, once remarked that “the opposite of art is not nature but well meant (*gut gemeint*)” (Benn II, 1984: 156). This can be read as a radicalization of T. S. Eliot’s famous axiom that “[t]he more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (Eliot 2005: 154). Art – real art that deserves its name – is cold. Or, as nineteenth-century French thinkers liked to point out, art (pronounced in French with a nasal *a* and no *t*) is the sound an eagle makes when it swoops down on its prey. A good poem is made of words, not of feelings; it is clinical, technical, distant, removed, almost arctic in its isolation and therefore exceedingly rare, as opposed to the well-intentioned verbiage emanating from salons, seminars, or barricades designed to soothe, instruct, or mobilize

impressionable readers. A similar axiom could be applied to Kittler's self-understanding as a theorist: *the opposite of theory is not practice but well meant*. Good theory does little to improve the human lot; it does not make the world a better place; it merely serves to make it a bit more inhospitable for bad – that is, naive, sentimental, uninformed, serenely clueless, and hopelessly deluded – theorizing. To use the biased and often unapologetically macho thermal metaphors that Kittler and those writing in his wake are so fond of, this particular type of media theory sees itself as a necessary cold-water current injected into notoriously warm waters. We will have to investigate what this current consists of, where it originates, and how it enriches the larger streams it enters.

1

BACKGROUND – BIOGRAPHY AND BEYOND

1. AFTER STALINGRAD

The philosopher Martin Heidegger (who will haunt this introduction just as he has haunted Kittler's career) once summarized the life of Aristotle in a memorably economic way: "He was born, worked, and died." In other (and more) words: Aristotle's importance resides in what he thought; whatever else he may have done on the side – living, getting involved in Athenian politics, attempting to turn the young Alexander the Great into a responsible adult – is not worth talking about. Though still alive, Kittler seems ideally suited for Heidegger's pithy summary.

Friedrich Adolf Kittler was born on June 12, 1943, in Rochlitz, a small town in Saxony close to Germany's eastern border. In 1958 his family relocated to Lahr, a small town in the Black Forest near Germany's western border. After finishing high school in 1963 he enrolled in German, Romance studies, and philosophy at the nearby Albert-Ludwigs