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Friedrich Kittler as Discursive Analyst

THE strategy pursued by Manfred Frank in the late seventies and early eighties was to integrate poststructuralism into German intellectual life by asserting its origins in a familiar tradition (German idealism) and by suggesting its amalgamation with acceptable approaches (hermeneutic theory). Another way to introduce poststructuralism to a skeptical German public is to present it as a rejection or as an overcoming of that same familiar tradition and those same acceptable approaches. The native proximity to poststructuralism would thereby appear less direct, and an appropriation would perhaps be less appealing. But this manner of presentation has the advantage of confirming Frank's positive evaluation of French theory without requiring that it be situated in a historical lineage with which it has obviously been somewhat uncomfortable. Most readers familiar with the central texts of Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida will have recognized that Frank's conciliatory gesture toward poststructuralism goes somewhat against the grain. The portrayal of poststructuralism as discontinuous with German idealism and hermeneutics is more consistent with certain tendencies in poststructuralism itself. The superannuated notion of history as a linear flowing or a one-dimensional passage of time has been a major target in many poststructuralist critiques. The postulate of a radical rupture with the past and with those theories that are obsolete extensions of the past thus follows a line of argumentation that by now has become extremely familiar. While Frank's careful analysis and reasoned contentions make sense, and while his plea for a "middle road" between poststructuralism and hermeneutics seems eminently reasonable, the depiction of French thought as the vanquisher of German theory preserves a potential appeal to the rebellious spirit often found in young

students as well as the public image nurtured by most post-structuralists and their disciples.

This more confrontational route was the one traversed by Friedrich Kittler, possibly the most imaginative and original of the German poststructuralists. But perhaps more important than the antagonistic relationship between French and German thought in his works is the different way in which poststructuralism enters into his writings. In contrast to Frank, Kittler does not discuss French poststructuralist theory directly or extensively in any of his writings. He has not been interested in mediating the poststructuralists to a German public by explicating them or by rephrasing their views in more familiar terms, but rather by demonstrating in a practical way what poststructuralism can accomplish. We should recall that in 1977 Kittler was co-author of the programmatic introduction to *Urszenen* that promulgated a tripartite function for discursive analysis.¹ At that time he suggested implementing this Foucauldian project in order to describe events of traditional literary and cultural histories in a new, poststructuralist fashion. Although he did not detail his specific interests in this introductory piece, from the examples cited it was evident that he was particularly concerned with changes that had occurred around 1800 or, more generally, during what has become known as the "Age of Goethe." His first book, published in the same year as the introduction, did not really deal with these issues. Although there was some influence of poststructuralism, his study of dream and speech in the works of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, a German-writing Swiss author from the second half of the nineteenth century, was more indebted to Lacan and psychoanalysis.² In the book he published jointly with Gerhard Kaiser the following year and in subsequent publications, however, his concern for isolating and analyzing the distinctiveness of discourse around 1800 became more apparent.³ By the early eighties it must have been apparent to him that the best way to deal with the issues he had outlined in the late seventies was to present a contrast in distinctiveness between the "Age of Goethe" and what we might call for lack of a better description the "Age of Modernism."

The result of these considerations led to the publication of one of the most interesting monographs of the eighties: *Aufschreibesysteme 1800–1900* (literally "Notation Systems"), a book that has recently appeared in English with the title *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*.⁴ Its project can be best understood as falling somewhere between the German and the English title. Kittler is definitely concerned on one level with notation systems, or more precisely, with how things become written down,

recorded, and inscribed during the "Age of Goethe" and during the modern period, and one part of his book is bent on persuading the reader that two distinct and separate systems of writing were in effect during these periods. The first system, which is associated in general with classicism, romanticism, and idealism, views language as a conduit for an individual spirit or intellect. The human being is placed at the center in this conception of the production of the written word, as creator and controller of linguistic signs. The system which replaces it—Kittler does not deal with the messy business of how this transformation comes about—valorizes the written word over the human beings through whom it becomes recorded. Around 1900 language becomes a medium among other media. Its materiality is recognized, and the human being, who previously appeared to employ it for self-expression, recedes into oblivion. In its broadest outlines, therefore, the tale Kittler relates is not wholly unfamiliar, and the English title does a better job of capturing (or recapturing) one of his central preoccupations and of highlighting the major theoretical influence for the book. Although we encounter citations from Derrida and Lacan liberally sprinkled throughout this work, it is clear that Kittler draws more heavily on the work of Michel Foucault for his overall framework. Rather than the deconstruction of the text or the linguistic structuration of the unconscious, Kittler, like Foucault, is most interested in historical differences and the discourses that mark epochs.

The reliance on Foucault is perhaps most noticeable on the macrolevel of Kittler's thought. The division of the volume into two distinct time periods and the absence of a transition between them recalls the methodological procedures that Foucault employed in *The Order of Things* and justified in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Kittler is obviously also trying to discover discursive patterns for a particular age. Thus, like Foucault, he demonstrates a total indifference to the conflicts that occur within the confines of a certain era. As David Wellbery points out in his excellent and sympathetic introduction to the English version of the book, Kittler is not writing an ideological critique of specific utterances or subdiscourses, but endeavoring instead to delineate the regularities that underwrite even the apparent controversies. Like Foucault, therefore, Kittler employs a descriptive approach to establish discrete typologies. We will remember that Foucault's epistemes of the Renaissance, the classical, and (in a somewhat sketchier fashion) the modern were postulated by means of an examination of four disciplinary areas apparently unconnected with each other. The similarity between them consisted in commonalities with regard to

their relationship to and their constitution of their respective objects. In a similar fashion Kittler proceeds not by means of an interpretation or criticism of individual works or authors, but rather by observing "superficial" features. He is not interested in showing that an individual author was "right" or "wrong," or that a given text is "biased" or "accurate." His concern is instead with the conditions of possibility for utterance at all. This Foucauldian paradigm that Kittler shares leads to an array of unexpected connections between disparate phenomena. But it also evidences the central deficiencies found in Foucault's work of the late sixties: the absence of linkage or mediation between two epistemes or epochs, the relativistic implications of discursive configurations, and the impression that at times data are being forced into a framework that is more constrictive than it need be.

It would be wrong, however, to view Kittler solely as a German follower of Foucault. Although he definitely holds the late "professor of the history of systems of thought"⁵ in high regard, his relationship to him is not one of simple discipleship. In the afterword to the second edition of his book Kittler describes most succinctly the limitations of Foucault's work. All the periods Foucault treats in *The Order of Things* are approached through written sentences. The archives he establishes for an epoch are based on documents that were all recorded in a fundamentally similar fashion. Foucault's hesitancy to describe the modern era, Kittler claims, derives from the trouble he had in coping with the altered methods that arose after the "second industrial revolution." In a word, what is missing in Foucault is an account of technology and the changes it brings with it for discursive analysis. "Archaeologists of the present must also take into account data storage, transmission, and calculation in technological media."⁶ Foucault's "materialism" with regard to documents thus did not go far enough. It fell short of considering the changes wrought by modifications in the networks of discourse themselves. The consequences of this shortcoming can be seen in the equivocation associated with Foucault's discussion of certain disciplines in the modern era, in particular psychoanalysis, ethnology, and structural linguistics. Foucault views these fields with an uncertainty, Kittler claims, because he is unsure whether they "represented the last moraine of transcendental knowledge or a new beginning."⁷ Foucault's error was not recognizing that these disciplines were themselves part of a discourse network that arose in conjunction with fundamental alterations in technology.

Accordingly Kittler focuses his own "order of things" not only on the discourse about writing, but also on the technology involved with

writing, as well as on its implications for other areas of social life. In the first half of the volume, devoted to the "writing system" of 1800, he therefore finds it germane to consider the way in which reading and writing were taught, and to this end he cites extensively from various primers composed during the period. In particular he notes that there existed the tendency away from teaching language phonetically through nonsense syllables and toward the use of real monosyllabic words from the German language. Subsequently, at some point in the eighteenth century, Kittler hypothesizes, the sounds of the individual letters became more important than words for teaching literacy. His claim is that this methodological shift is part of a naturalizing trend; the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, a hallmark of the previous epoch, is ignored, and language is thus incorporated into the sphere of nature. This reconstitution of the relationship between language and nature is connected, in turn, with alterations in familial and social structure. The mother, as nature and ideal, is the source for the mother tongue, entrusted with the pedagogical task of language instruction. It is her responsibility to educate her sons as civil servants for the state, which is responsible for enforcing the new literacy. Although I can give only the results of Kittler's various narrative strands, it should be evident to the reader that his concerns are broad. Throughout his initial discussion he is intent upon exploring the connections between such phenomena as the reduction of illiteracy, the socialization of the educational system, the rise of the concept of *Bildung* (education or acculturation), and the appearance of a particular notion of the human being. In the latter part of his consideration of the notation systems around 1800 he weaves other selected topics into his discursive mosaic; among these are translation theory, the reading public for *belles lettres*, and the close association of poetry and philosophy. A good portion of these latter themes are developed from an ingenious reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldene Topf* (The Golden Pot), which becomes something like the archetypical fairy tale for the "discourse network" of 1800.

One of the by-products of Kittler's analysis is the temporal displacement of the very traditions that Frank tried to make timely for a poststructuralist criticism. German idealism and the hermeneutic tradition that emanates from it are categorized not as wrong or deficient by Kittler, but simply as outmoded and therefore inapposite as partners for contemporary French thought. Hermeneutics, especially in its romantic form, is an interpretive enterprise that seeks the spirit behind the letter, that breathes life into the dead documents by insisting on a unique and vital source for utterances. The title to a collection of essays

Kittler edited in 1980 is instructive in this regard. *Die Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften* (The Expulsion of Spirit from the Spiritual [or Human] Sciences) indicates the direction in which Kittler is proceeding. His is an aspiritual approach, in contrast to a hermeneutically oriented procedure that, even in Frank's somewhat minimalist fashion, has recourse to a "spiritual" origin for textual production. As a practitioner of posthermeneutic criticism, Kittler "stops making sense."⁸ He provides his own historical justification for doing so when he describes the analysis of the hermeneutic project as delimited by certain definable notions of language pedagogy, state interventions, maternal relationships to sons and daughters, and technologies of writing. The implicit message is that hermeneutics cannot be joined to an authentic poststructuralist enterprise because the two projects are themselves manifestations of radically different epochal practices. Hermeneutics belongs, for better or for worse, to the discarded archive from a previous era.

What, then, is the new network that Kittler detects at the beginning of our century, and how can one describe it in terms of technology and not merely in its discursive appearances? Perhaps Kittler's central claim in dealing with the modern era is that the logic associated with the materiality of language, a logic of "pure differentiability,"⁹ also produces the typewriter, the phonograph, and film. The advent of these three machines destroys the "Gutenberg Galaxy" by splitting into different media the appropriate channels for words, sounds, and pictures.¹⁰ Combining the analysis of statements made by the inventors and propagators of these technological innovations with the implications he derives from the technology itself, Kittler sketches for the reader a system in which the precepts and beliefs identified with the previous discourse network have been overturned. The distinction between sense and nonsense blurs;¹¹ the transcendental norm for language, formerly identified with a spoken ideal, "falls into an endless series";¹² the subject, who had previously been believed to use language, now disappears from the scene.¹³ In short, "in the discourse network of 1900, discourse is produced by RANDOM GENERATORS. Psychophysics constructed such sources of noise; the new technological media stored their output."¹⁴ The social manifestations accompanying the new technology are also radically different from what had established itself around 1800. The unity of culture, based on the mutual transparency of writing, reading, speaking, and hearing, disintegrates;¹⁵ the role of the sexes is completely reversed since the "imaginary Mother's Mouth" is replaced by the man giving dictation

to his secretary;¹⁶ for the first time in a literate culture people are "reduced to the naked recognition of signs."¹⁷ The "discourse network of writing"¹⁸ evidences the victory of what Kittler refers to as psychophysics. Nietzsche is the inaugurator of this new system; Mallarmé its first poet; Freud the perhaps unwitting but exemplary proponent. The nation of "Poets and Thinkers" (*Dichter und Denker*) becomes one of writers and analysts.¹⁹

As in the first part of this book, Kittler explores these topics with materials from a number of unusual, as well as more conventional, sources. With the exception of brief remarks on Gottfried Benn, Arno Holz, and Stefan George; however, the traditional field of literature is less prominently represented. Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) is the only literary work "interpreted" in any detail, and Kittler's suggestion for renaming it *Memoirs of My Simulations of Nervous Illness* (*Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkrankheitssimulanten*)²⁰ gives some indication of the direction he wishes to take. His general observations about differences in literary production in the two epochs, however, provides some insight into both his method and his style. For readers unacquainted with them the following quote should give some inkling of what he is after:

Poetic works of 1800 belonged in the Kingdom of God. An Absolute Spirit, in which no member was sober, consumed all authors and works at the end of their earthly cycles. The authors turned in their civic names at the chalice of this realm of spirits, but only in order to attain the infinity of interpretation and the immortality of meaning.

A completely different God stands over the discourse network of 1900 and its inkwells. He has gone mad. In him the simulators of madness have their master. When the insane God drinks, it is not in order to sublimate fantasies in a threefold sense. Where in 1800 there was a function of philosophical consumption, one hundred years later there is bare annihilation. Writers who drown in the inkwell of the insane God do not achieve the immortality of an author's name; they simply replace anonymous and paradoxical alphabets who are capable of writing down a whole discourse network from the outside. For that reason there are no authors and works, but only writers and writing.²¹

I have quoted at length here not only to allow Kittler to represent his own case but also to give the reader an idea of how he represents it. For I think that the single most disturbing factor for readers of this book, and, indeed, of much of Kittler's prose, will be the style in which it is written. Too often arguments seem obscure and private. One frequently has the impression that the author is writing not to communicate, but to amuse himself. His text consists of a tapestry of leitmotifs, puns, and

cryptic pronouncements, which at times makes for fascinating reading, but too often resembles free association as much as it does serious scholarship. As in much of poststructuralist writing here and abroad, the often-cited rigor is more an assertion of the convinced than a fact of the prose: analysis frequently cedes to apodictic statement; logic repeatedly yields to rhetorical flourishes. Kittler goes out of his way to write genially, and although many connections he makes are both original and illuminating, his penchant for preferring *bons mots* to reasoned arguments is ultimately deleterious to his goals—assuming, that is, that at least one of his aims is for us to understand and to be persuaded by his presentation.

There is a related difficulty with Kittler's arguments. The incessant search for the witty phrasing, for the aperçu or pun, or for the semblance of profundity often means that he is willing to sacrifice philological accuracy in driving home his argument. Let me illustrate the shortcomings of Kittler's style and argumentation—for I believe they are inseparably linked—briefly with the very first sentence of the book. The initial statement reads as follows: "German Poetry begins with a sigh" (*Die Deutsche Dichtung hebt an mit einem Seufzer*). Kittler then quotes as "evidence" the initial verses from the first scene in *Faust I* ("Have, oh, studied philosophy" [*Hab nun, ach! Philosophie*]). His point here is, as I have explained above, that a spirit or intellect informs the written word in the discourse system of 1800; the "ach," he maintains, is a sign of this "unique entity (the soul)."²² Although this argument is neither uninteresting nor unfounded, the manner in which he seeks to demonstrate it asks readers to stretch their knowledge and their ability to read too much. *Faust* does not stand at the beginning of German literature; it is usually viewed as the culmination of Goethe's creative efforts and of German classicism in general. Even *Urfaust* was not Goethe's first work, and certainly no one would place it at the beginning of even the modern literary tradition. Nor does *Faust* actually begin with these verses; the authoritative version includes the poem "Zueignung" and two prologues before the scene in *Faust's* chamber. Finally, the "ach" does not start the line, much less German literature, but is embedded squarely in the middle. Now these objections can surely be seen as petty. They relate only to minor details, not to the thesis as a whole. Kittler could counter that his readers will understand what he means here, ignore the fudging of facts, and probably go along with his argument. The problem is that this sort of argumentation is not the exception, but the rule. The grand theses about the characteristics of discursive systems and technologies in 1800 and 1900 all too frequently

govern the readings of passages, bending them out of shape, or rather, into the shape in which Kittler wants them to appear. At times his claims seem arbitrary; the examples he introduces, which are anyway the result of a selective process, seem to be read selectively and forced into a pigeonhole in which they fit uncomfortably. In short, even when we have managed to fight through the opaqueness of much of the text, we are asked to buy into the rhetorical strategy and hyperbole too much and too often, abjuring in the process obvious facts and counter-examples.²³

In light of its style one would be justified in raising the question of what "writing system" Kittler's own work belongs to. On the one hand, Kittler is, for reasons I have enumerated above, a unique practitioner of poststructuralism in Germany, and his considerable intellect and originality are evident in all of his various writings. One might therefore be tempted to see his oeuvre as a throwback to the "*Geniezeit*," or at least as the attempt to refashion this era for the present. On the other hand, Kittler himself obviously pays a great deal of attention to the materiality of the printed word. By this I mean not only those passages involving wordplays—he reminds us, for example, that "*ach*" is part of *Sprache* (language)—but also the manner in which he presents his materials. Here I am referring to more than just the style of writing. In the German version of *Discourse Networks* headings are supplemented by notes in the margins, a feature that was unfortunately omitted in the English edition; illustrations (reproduced in the English version) are frequent and carefully integrated into the text; the front cover of the German paperback shows us an austere, priestly figure pointing to a typewriter; the back cover depicts Goethe, as bureaucrat, answering a telephone. Kittler obviously feels that word and image in their material reality are as important as message, and his work is meant as both example and explanation of this materiality. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Kittler believes he must operate under the "writing system" of 1900 since it is somehow more accurate to reality or at least more aware of the true function of the written word:

The discourse network of 1800 played the game of not being a discourse network and pretended instead to be the inwardness and voice of Man; in 1900 a type of writing assumes power that does not conform to traditional writing systems but rather radicalizes the technology of writing in general.²⁴

Kittler's lack of reflection on his own historical situatedness notwithstanding, from the remarks he does make about notation systems of

two epochs his work can be viewed as obeying either the law of original spirit or the logic of differential materiality.

The uncertainty we encounter in trying to locate the force behind Kittler's own work is perhaps a consequence of the contamination of one system by another, a sign that the discreteness on which Kittler insists is less clear-cut than he imagines. But rather than having Kittler's work vacillate between these two epochs, we might want to consider that it participates in the beginnings of a new, as yet uncharted era. This new epoch is not even on the horizon in *Discourse Networks*, but in the introduction to *Grammophon Film Typewriter*, a book Kittler also published in 1985, he speculates on how we might begin to describe the notation system of the year 2000. It is characterized above all by the leveling of the distinctions among the various media. Glass-fiber optics has made the transmission of sound and sight, voice and text, a matter of fundamentally interchangeable electromagnetic impulses. On the basis of computer technology everything can be reduced to a binary basis, a choice between two numbers, zero or one, on or off. The differentiation that took place around 1900 is thereby canceled without bringing us back to the humanistic starting point. The age of media has become the epoch of microelectronics; "the compact disc digitalizes the gramophone, the videocamera, the movies."²⁵ Although it is impossible to name the writing system that will govern the year 2000 and under which Kittler composes his oeuvre, we might want to speculate nonetheless on what technological emblem to assign to it. If the "writing system" around 1800 employed pen and ink and "the Mouth of the Mother," if the subsequent system is identified with typewriter, phonograph, and film, we might see the "Discourse Network 2000" prefigured in the television, the computer, and above all the walkman, i.e., in hermetic, self-contained, privatized systems which use public media, channels, and data, but which, at least in their instantiation in modern industrial societies, do as much to defy as to promote communication.

When I listed the deficiencies common to Kittler and to Foucault's project in *The Order of Things*, I neglected to mention at least one item. In my previous discussion of Foucault's German reception I tried to show that the transition to his work of the seventies, the switch from archeology to genealogy and from epistemic structures to the micro-physics of power, was accompanied by a marked politicization of his theory. Kittler's project, as I have also indicated in this previous chapter, fails to submit to this politicized regime. Although he supplements the notion of discourse analysis with a consideration of technology, he

refrains from incorporating a notion of power that could possess political ramifications. What we find instead in his work is the antiseptic and distanced description of complicities. In *Grammophon Film Typewriter* the logic of the media is associated with strategies developed by the German High Command; and at the close of the same book Kittler implies that the National Security Agency is manipulating our future by appropriating and instrumentalizing the technology of the computerized epoch. But the "exteriority"²⁶ with which Kittler views these connections and, indeed, all the connections he describes leave him and his reader either on the outside gazing at a reified nexus of technologies and discourses, or caught in an infinite and immutable network of connections from which there is no escape. Unlike Frank, whose political criticism emanates from the insistence on an individual non-determination that escapes structuration, Kittler is able to muster only a helpless and cynical political gesture. Thus we may admire his voluminous scholarship, his intuitive insights, and his stylistic bravado; and we may even want to affirm that his work has been a high point of the German appropriation of poststructuralism. But I suspect that while his postmodern readers are emitting spirited sighs of exhilaration and admiration, the "ach" uttered by those still adhering to political agendas will ultimately be one of exasperation and frustration.

32. Frank, *Neostructuralism*, p. 184.
33. Frank, *Neostructuralism*, p. 342.
34. Frank, *Die Unhintergebarkeit*, p. 11.
35. Manfred Frank, "Kleiner (Tübinger) Programmentwurf: Philosophie heute und jetzt: Ein paar Überlegungen," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (5 March 1988), p. ZB 3.

Chapter 7. Friedrich Kittler as Discursive Analyst

1. See my discussion of Kittler and Turk's introduction to *Urszenen* above.
2. Friedrich Kittler, *Der Traum und die Rede: Eine Analyse der Kommunikationssituation Conrad Ferdinand Meyers* (Bern: Francke, 1977).
3. Gerhard Kaiser and Friedrich Kittler, *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel: Studien zu Goethe und Gottfried Keller* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).
4. Friedrich Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800–1900* (Munich: Fink, 1985); *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
5. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 451.
6. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 369.
7. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 278.
8. David E. Wellbery, Foreword to *Discourse Networks*, p. ix.
9. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 189.
10. For a more detailed investigation of this new technology see Kittler's *Grammophon Film Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Rose, 1985). "With the historical co-temporaneity of movies, phonographs, and typewriting the optic, acoustic, and written data flow are separated and made autonomous" (p. 27).
11. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 209.
12. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 215.
13. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 258.
14. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 206.
15. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 214.
16. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 227.
17. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 222.
18. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 212.
19. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 312.
20. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 336.
21. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, pp. 336–37.
22. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 11.
23. For a more detailed criticism of Kittler's methods in this work see the extended review by Thomas Sebastian, "Technology Romanticized: Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*," *Modern Language Notes* 105, no. 3 (1990): 583–95. Sebastian's central objection is that Kittler reduces historical differences illicitly to the substrate of media technology, thereby ignoring or obscuring the historical specificity of his material.
24. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, pp. 211–12.
25. Kittler, *Grammophon*, p. 33.
26. Wellbery claims that the first component of Kittler's program is the "pre-supposition of exteriority" (*Discourse Networks*, p. xii).

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