Friedrich Kittler (1943–2011)

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In 1946, Martin Heidegger wrote his "Letter on Humanism" in reply to questions sent to him by his student Jean Beaufret, who wanted to know whether Heidegger endorsed Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion that Existentialism is a Humanism. Heidegger emphatically did not. He dismissed Sartre's inversion of the metaphysical tenet that essence precedes existence by pointing out that the reversal of a metaphysical proposition is still a metaphysical proposition. And then he turned to more serious matters: "Sie fragen: Comment redonner un sens au mot 'Humanisme'? Diese Frage kommt aus der Absicht, das Wort 'Humanismus' festzuhalten. Ich frage mich, ob das nötig sei. Oder ist das Unheil, das alle Titel dieser Art, noch nicht offensichtlich genug?" (You ask, How to give meaning anew to the word "Humanism"? The question stems from the intent to hold on to the word "Humanism." I wonder whether this is necessary. Or is the disaster caused by all designations of this sort not evident enough?)[1]

1. Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den 'Humanismus'" (1946), in *Wegmarken 1919–58*, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967), 313–64; my

Among the "designations of this sort," Heidegger reserved pride of place to philosophy and literature. Irremediably mired in the quaking bog of metaphysics, they must be left behind. For what? "Er ist an der Zeit, daß man sich dessen entwöhnt, die Philosophie zu überschätzen und sie deshalb zu überfordern. Nötig ist in der jetziger Weltnot: weniger Philosophie, aber mehr Achtsamkeit des Denkens; weniger Literatur, aber mehr Pflege des Buchstabens." (It is time to wean ourselves from overestimating philosophy and overburdening it. What is needed in the present world crisis is less philosophy but more attention to thinking, less literature but more care for the letter.)[2]

Friedrich Kittler seemed to take these words to heart and made them the driving force of his own intellectual endeavors, especially the last clause: "less literature but more care for the letter." The German word *Buchstabe* used by Heidegger designates γράμματα (*grammata*) and can be rendered in English by "letter," "character," "type," and "alphabetic symbol." It has given us the cognates *bookstaff* and *bookstave*. The Greek word is derived from the verb *to write* and literally designates the product of the writing. The German word follows Indo-European usage in identifying the support on which the writing occurs: tablets of beech wood. (German *Buch* is *beech tree* in English, as well as *book*, the latter a term first designating a body of gathered writings.) These lexical and semantic distinctions were of great import to Kittler; they pointed to something that was too often left out of consideration: the role of technologies and their historicity.

Kittler redefined Heidegger's call for "more care for the letter" as an injunction to pay greater attention to the historically evolving technologies of writing. In the same "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger wrote of the emergence of "technological Man" (*Mensch*), a creature of mass society, according to him, who aligns his plans and activities in a way that corresponds to technology. Kittler later abandoned the metaphysical conception of technology as prosthetic extension of our body, to grant it autonomy and determinant force.

Friedrich Adolf Kittler was born in Saxony in 1943. This area became part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) after the war. He was largely homeschooled by his father, who had been dismissed from his job as high school principal for ideological reasons, although he attended state

schools since homeschooling was not permitted in the GDR. The family fled to West Germany in 1958. Kittler went to the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, where he studied German literature, romance philology, and philosophy. Uni Freiburg, as it is commonly known, was the university where Heidegger taught and where he had been briefly rector. Kittler discovered the works of Lacan and Foucault during the course of his studies and was immensely taken with both. He wrote a dissertation on a German romantic poet and started working on Goethe. At this juncture, he seemed cast to become a conventional scholar of German literature. His first academic appointment was as a junior faculty member at Uni Freiburg. He traveled to the United States on exchange agreements, and taught at the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Santa Barbara; and Stanford University. He also got involved with the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, where he began to give his work the orientation toward the historical analysis of media for which he would become famous. From 1986 to 1990, he headed the Deutsche Forschung Gemeinschaft (the German National Science Foundation) Literature and Media Analysis project in Kassel. In 1987, he was appointed to the chair of German at the University of Bochum. In 1993, he took up the chair of Aesthetics and History of Media at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, where he stayed until his retirement in 2010, a year before his death.

It is with his work on Goethe that Kittler found his intellectual path. He noticed that Goethe distanced himself from the sciences that had formed the core of early modernity, such as medicine and physics, and was very attentive to the rise of new knowledge formations, such as population statistics, administration, and early economic theory (cameralistics), and he incorporated them into his fiction writing. This shift of attention opened up a new field of exploration of human relations, motivation, and determination. Kittler began to view the interaction between various knowledge formations and literature as systemic and as developing a logic of its own. He saw the parallel to Michel Foucault's analysis of discursive formations. But he also saw the limits of Foucault's notion of discourse: its archive was limited to verbal artifacts considered from a semantic perspective, with occasional forays into the visual arts. He noticed the growing ascendancy of images and their gain on functions hitherto provided by literature, and decided that this historical development required the addition of media such as photography and cinema to the archive and to examine the impact of these additions on our understanding of literature.

But such an addition was not merely an act of quantitative expansion,

he quickly realized. Media have complex dynamic relations among themselves: photography alters painting, cinema affects the theater, and both challenge understandings of referentiality elaborated under conditions of linguistic hegemony. Qualitative change requires the adoption of a research protocol that has to identify minute transformations and interactions. It is in this context that Kittler developed his method of investigative historical materialism. In 1985, he published *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (published in English as *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990]). *Aufschreibesysteme* literally means "systems of notation." Kittler invented a new object of knowledge by focusing on what writing, music, and mathematics have in common: they rely on written notation to record verbal and musical sounds as well as numerical values. But the notation systems do much more than record: they permit the manipulation of the symbolic representations of what they purportedly record, so much so that the relation of recorded to recording is increasingly replaced by that of manipulating to manipulated. This central event of human innovation remained at the core of Kittler's preoccupations (he returned to it in the interview that follows these remarks, asking himself why the ancient Greeks wanted to record the sound of vowels when the Semitic people, from whom they borrowed their alphabet, did not bother). This kind of shift, in which an action reverses the direction of a process and, as a result, brings about new dimensions of human capability and self-understanding, is paradigmatic of the phenomena that he studied henceforth.

The following year, he published *Gramophon Film Typewriter* (in English, *Gramophone Film Typewriter* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999]). In this book, he explored how the hegemony of the printed word was shattered by the emergence of new ways of communicating and storing data. Whereas print mediates all data through written signifiers, photography, the phonograph, and cinema store actual physical effects as sound and light waves, giving a sense of immediacy to their referentiality. Similarly, the typewriter strips the unique expressiveness of the handwritten and substitutes a concatenation of naked signifiers. Kittler suggested that Jacques Lacan's distinction between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real derived from and depended on the transformations ushered in by the technologies he studied. Human psychology and our psychic apparatus are increasingly perceived in terms of information machines, and their eventual connection or merger becomes increasingly thinkable.

Kittler's favorite novel was *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like Pynchon, he saw war as the crucible of new technologies and new human formations. This

led him to explore cybernetics, where he focused on the work of Alan Turing in breaking up German war codes and how this led to the rise of computers. He was himself quite computer savvy, capable of writing code in several computer languages, always focusing, however, on the transformations of the human that were at stake in them. Still following Pynchon, he was very interested in the development of the V-2 rocket, visiting the site of its manufacture in Peenemünde. He wrote detailed analyses of the shifts in conceptions of time and distance necessary to solve the problems of the flight of the rocket.

In the later years of his life, he returned to the Greeks, and although he remained faithful to his love of Pink Floyd, he spent time studying Greek music, its articulation to mathematics, and to the very meaning of Hellas. His Greece is not Foucault's, and he increasingly focused on the notion of love he felt had to be liberated from its Christian appropriation.

This brief account of Friedrich Kittler would be incomplete without a note on the man himself. Unlike his *maîtres à penser*, he did not think that the work of thought had to be ponderous (Heidegger), austere (Foucault), or sibylline (Lacan); he thought it could be fun, and he brought to it an impish attitude that makes his writings a pleasure to read. This is most evident in his lectures, some of which are available in English. There was one topic on which he was always deadly serious, and that is the current state, and future fate, of the university, including his own. Unlike many of his colleagues, he did not think that the principal problem of contemporary universities was the attitude of political and corporate leaders toward it. He thought it was the cravenness of the scholars who were all too ready to jettison the honor of thought for the marketable values of professionalism.