The COLD MODEL of STRUCTURE

FRIEDRICH KITTLER Interviewed by CHRISTOPH WEINBERGER

ABSTRACT   The following interview with Friedrich Kittler, conducted by Christoph Weinberger in July 2007, is a passionate and instructive tour de force of pithy sound bites in which Kittler looks back on his work and criticizes alternate approaches to media.

KEYWORDS: Friedrich Kittler, media studies, structuralism, Germany

Christoph Weinberger completed his PhD in 2010 at the University of Vienna, where he studied journalism and communication studies. His dissertation is titled "Intoxication, Hallucination, and Madness: Medial Phantasms in the Discourse Networks of Friedrich Kittler." He is a lecturer (with special focus on media philosophy) at the Institute for Philosophy in Vienna and publishes widely in Austrian newspapers and journals.

> **Christoph Weinberger:** Does your orientation toward music, mathematics, and the alphabet in ancient Greece present a continuation or a departure from your work of the 1980s? Is there a "turning" in Friedrich Kittler's thought?

Friedrich Kittler: No, not at all! I recently amused myself by describing the "Discourse Network 300." I believe I was able to reconstruct with a certain precision how Aristotle was culturalized and alphabetized and how he, like so many other Greeks, proceeded to generate a theory that has enormous difficulties distinguishing between sound, sounds and letters. To me this represents a continuity,

which is why I am baffled and slightly annoyed when people who are not too fond of me anyway claim that I have abandoned media: "He's only into the Greeks now!" I, for one, have the feeling I have finally arrived at the foundation of our culture, where it all began.

CW: So it is an expansion of *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, which is a founding document of German media studies?[1]

FK: Exactly. What is at stake is that we finally—and in the interest of Europe—go back to the Greeks in order to provide Europe with a viable foundation of thought. Do we want to go back to the New Testament, the Old Testament, or the Koran? For heaven's sake, no!

CW: You used to conceptualize "man" as a cybernetic data processing system. Now you say that man is the only being that has Logos.

FK: Well, you can't always put such a bleak message on display. A good acquaintance of mine once asked me, "What is the difference between *Discourse Networks* and *Music and Mathematics*?" And I said, "The former was a knife; the latter is a fork." I mean, you cannot go on biting the hands of the teachers and predecessors that feed you and then finally your own. That was the principal objection against *Discourse Networks* and the one which upset me the most—that I was sawing off the branch I was sitting on. Back then it was called German studies.

CW: Under the programmatic title *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften* [*Expulsion of the Spirit from the Humanities*] you formulated a radical critique of the established history of ideas.

FK: In one of my current lectures I covertly repeated this claim when I spoke about the beauty of Michel Foucault's *Order of Things* and how much that book changed us. It was a matter of breaking up the continuum of history, which was also the principal goal of my habilitation. The latter, incidentally, was always misquoted: *Discourse Networks from 1800 to 1900*. People missed the slash between 1800 and 1900.

CW: Would you phrase certain things in *Discourse Networks* differently today? Isn't it written in a very provocative, gimmicky style?

FK: I don't think so. It's a damned erudite book. And the erudition is hidden behind this provocative style. To my mind, things like Freud's boundless obsession with words in the founding days of psychoanalysis are described correctly. Revisionists love to cover this up. Unlike me, everybody is so keen on conciliatory gestures. What can I say? Epochs turned by 170 rather than 180 degrees, but then people come along and behave as if there were one happy continuity to

1897. But I do believe that I was right. Everything has its historical index, and foundational texts belong to a particular system outside of which they cannot survive. As Foucault always said: Karl Marx does not present an innovation; he swims in his episteme like a fish in water.

CW: And the spirit [*Geist*] too does not exist in a vacuum.

FK: Indeed. Take, for example, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*. A specific medial constellation is essential to the text. The world keeps overlooking how well behaved I was: *Discourse Networks* contains two exemplary interpretations. I think I interpreted *The Golden Pot* better than many others did. And leaving aside the historical bits, I also pride myself on having given a pretty good account of the contemporaneity of [Rainer Maria Rilke's] *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. I facilitated a more efficient type of reading able to support more text. I read so much psychology around 1800 and psychiatry around 1900. I'd like to see others do that.

CW: You are a trained Germanist and Romanist . . .

FK: Yes, that's something people keep misconstruing. As if it were a proven fact that in the late 1970s Parisian structuralism somehow erupted at the German department in Freiburg in the shape of Klaus Theweleit and Friedrich Kittler. That is abysmally wrong!

CW: You mean, the notion that you both imported (post)structuralism, that is, Jacques Lacan, Foucault, and Jacques Derrida?

FK: Yes, the two of us. It's idiotic. First of all, it wasn't at the end but at the beginning of the 1970s. Back in 1973 I translated two-thirds—the two important thirds—of a seminal essay by Lacan, which I then circulated in 1975. I don't want to claim that it was me alone; Norbert Haas and a few others in Berlin and Strasbourg discovered Lacan on their own. But in my case there was a noticeable impact. I had a degree in French and was familiar with all the poets because I had studied under a brilliant Romanist. And now I was delighted to have discovered an even more beautiful theory genre. It was far more thrilling to read Lacan than to make do with average writers like Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre.

CW: Though, there are some who claim that you are some kind of existentialist trying to depict the absurdity of our media age.

FK: The stuff people come up with . . . I believe the impact of *Discourse Networks* had to do with my pitiless use of dates. I drummed into myself that everything has a date, an address, and a location. And I added a quirky index of persons that listed all the jobs you could

ever guess at, which was anti-everything that was prevalent in Germany at the time.

CW: How did it come about that thirteen reviews were necessary for *Discourse Networks* to be accepted as a habilitation thesis?[2]

FK: One of the first three reviewers—I had chosen him myself—told me in private that I was a nice person but that he needed to derail this habilitation in order to prevent the emergence of a second Foucault.

CW: Who or what was the bogeyman back then?

FK: Structuralism. The third reviewer couldn't refute it, but he wanted to make it more accessible to consciousness. And I was the poor victim . . .

CW: And what were you writing against? Hermeneutics and leftist social science?

FK: Yes, both of them. *Discourse Networks* came about when hermeneutics had established this clever alliance with Jürgen Habermas. Or the other way round. It was Habermas, I believe, who in the end smuggled Hans-Georg Gadamer onto his list of winners, at which point there was no getting through anymore. At the time I wrote my dissertation, this alliance had not yet been forged. It was still possible to attack hermeneutics with a bit of Lacan and Foucault.

CW: But what made these counterreadings so necessary?

FK: When I circulated my Lacan translation among fellow students and PhD candidates, the professor wasn't too happy. He wanted to ply them with Theodor W. Adorno and Habermas. That's what they were all used to—it was their natural element—and that's how dissertations were designed and written. And now I came along with a completely different, cold model of structure. It shocked people, but, strangely enough, most deserted to the other side.

CW: Your literary analyses furnished—as you like to put it—self-evident [*selbstredende*] results, also in the shape of numbers, dates, and facts that no longer appear to be in need of interpretation.

FK: But I did include a number of successful interpretations. I am terribly proud of my exposure of Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*.[3] I doubt that Schiller himself realized it, but he turned his own culturalization into literature and transferred it to Spain. Maybe it's my megalomania that others feel compelled to destroy, but I am convinced: that's it! There's nothing left to say. I don't need to write a second essay on *Don Carlos* or revise the first. Nor do I need lament

in old age how ignorant I was in my youth. No, the pure, mechanized, algorithmic structure of *Carlos* is the Karlsschule, the school Schiller attended.

CW: In contrast to a cultural studies approach, you are interested less in the meaning of media or their semiotic readability than in their impact.

FK: Well, the problem is that by now one can hardly distinguish media studies from the self-evidence of everyday life. Although, I must say, I am not too impressed by the acumen of these people and their fashion-conscious theory offerings. I am always shocked by the way this is done in the United States, when folks in the humanities sex up some neurophysiological finding, which is then all the rage for half a year.

CW: One of your central theses, which you took from Friedrich Nietzsche, is that our writing tools are contributing their share to our thoughts. What tools were these in your case?

FK: At one point I graduated from handwritten poems, which you write until you are nine, ten, or eleven, to my parents' typewriter. Poems and prose suddenly acquired a much more stable prospect and appearance. After a while the mechanical typewriter gave way to semielectric and fully electric models. The dissertation was semi-electric and the habilitation was fully electric, with [interchangeable] font balls for Greek and italic characters.

CW: And what came then?

FK: After sampling the delights of books and typewriters, I said to myself: Maybe there is something other than letters. So I took to tinkering with electronics. It's dreadful when media scholars pontificate about computers without ever having looked underneath the lid.

CW: You compared that to literature scholars who should write—or assemble—poems themselves.

FK: Exactly. Someone once said something terrible to me: "You do not need to write poems to be a scholar of literature." "No," I responded, "it is necessary for you to have written poems yourself!"

CW: You are a founder of discursivity. The perspective opened up by *Discourse Networks* has become unavoidable.

FK: I do not consider myself that original. I merely tried to the best of my knowledge and conscience to use the methodological toolbox of

Foucault and Lacan while avoiding Foucault's escapades. The claims of *Discourse Networks* are much more modest than those of *The Order of Things*. On the other hand, it's a more meticulous book, without the blunt mistakes Foucault used to make.

CW: But what makes you write? There is so much heartfelt passion in your texts . . .

FK: Someone told me that he studied law in order to prevent catastrophes. That wasn't my intention. I wanted to craft conceptual models—regional models, less ambitious than Martin Heidegger's history of being, equipped with a nonpositivist Occam's razor. After all, there is something to everything. The fact that Foucault and I had such an interest in functioning machines—as opposed to broken ones, like those in [Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's] *Anti-Oedipus*—may have been what united us.

CW: If every epoch has its media totality that appears to completely determine us, is there any space left for difference or even freedom?

FK: I am disconsolate when books aim to provide solace. You have to achieve freedom yourself; you cannot rely on books to simulate it. I took after Friedrich Dürrenmatt, whose guidelines for comedy dictated that things always have to be presented a bit worse than they actually are. Ultimately, elements of tragedy may creep in, as in the case of *Discourse Networks*. I myself am not too happy about the fact that everything in that book ends in the noise of machines.

CW: Are you given to hyperbole?

FK: Yes, I would say so—but for the simple reason that I do not want to bore myself and others. There's nothing more dreary and dismal than books that constantly try to weigh all the pros and cons. Also, I am proud of the fact that *Discourse Networks* is one of the very few habilitations from the early 1980s that has survived the times. All the others bloomed and withered away with the prevailing zeitgeist.

CW: How do you regard the fact that an entire school of thought has emerged in your wake?

FK: Funnily enough, I like it. We invested a lot of work that is now recognized worldwide. In the case of Marshall McLuhan, you can prove that every fifth sentence is wrong and every tenth is funny and very ingenious. And Harold Innis never managed to get into technical details. But I believe that the dicier and more in-your-face media become, the more necessary it is to understand their mechanical structure.

CW: Do you believe that the pendulum is about to swing to the other side?

FK: That's always a concern. Take the ongoing attempts to use the human brain as a point of departure for constructing the world. To me that's nonsense. I believe that human brains only exist within language. Neurophysiologists are aware of this, yet they deny it with every single statement they utter. The goal was to provide a more convincing account than ever before of the achievements and terrors, if not of culture as such then at least of our culture, by relating them to the medial sphere. Unfortunately, this makes me appear very Eurocentric, but such are the limits of my toolbox.

CW: How do you experience your advance from outsider to classic, from outlaw to professor? How did your approach turn out to be such a success story?

FK: Well, it was foreseeable. "I don't want a second Foucault" also meant "The work is great, but I am ideologically opposed it. Yet it does reveal what is so tremendously obvious in German texts but has never been properly perceived." That was praise as condemnation.

CW: Media studies has been institutionalized for some time now in Germany . . .

FK: Which we all regret a bit because it has lost its foundational momentum.

CW: To what extent is it meaningful to establish media studies as a discipline of its own?

FK: I think the worst that has happened is the unemployed sociologists who quickly switched over to media studies. Unlike Germanists and philosophers, they do not feel the need to use media studies to confront the defects of their own discipline. For sociologists, it's always the same old hat; they don't care whether they are analyzing television or thrill-seeking societies. I tell you, when it comes to the analysis of culture, the ability to conduct research that is more than merely idiosyncratic is underdeveloped in Germany. Sometimes magazines like *Der Spiegel* do better archeological work than we at the universities.

CW: Where are the pictorial media in *Discourse Networks*? Are there no other media around in 1800 apart from the universal medium of literature?

FK: Yes, a very famous senior Japanese colleague noted that *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* treats film a bit less lovingly than it does

the other apparatuses. I can't deny that. I have a passionate interest in erotic imagery, but it's not something I can write about well.

CW: In comparing *Discourse Networks* to the other great book, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, what is the difference between the two?

FK: The intention was clear: *Discourse Networks* for kids. With pictures and unabridged original texts. A book to leaf through and get lost in. A serene and happy book, unlike the other, black one, which contains my melancholy soul in full. And I finally was able to write about media as media; that is, I did not have to submit to Germanist standards which posited that media should be dealt with only in as far as they relate to literature.

CW: Is there something educational about your—essentially antihumanist—approach?

FK: The *taz* [*Die Tageszeitung*] once ran a column describing me as a community center instructor gone berserk. I really loved that. The only thing I found exasperating about Lacan was his jerky, aphoristic way of dressing things up. I mean, he knows what he's saying, so why doesn't he come out and say it?

CW: The turn to the Greeks extends, as it were, *Discourse Networks* back in time. But what about the other direction, going forward? "Discourse Networks 2000" was another project, wasn't it . . . ?

FK: But that would only exist as the content of all the servers all over the world. Who would be able to write that? It would be . . . *ach*!

CW: In your texts you show how media generate and produce realities. At the same time, however, media allow us to access a real that is stored rather than only symbolically encoded. For example, the gramophone.

FK: Yes, that happened to be the bone of contention with Niklas Luhmann and the constructivists. It is a unique characteristic of our European and subsequently global culture that it produces not only weather oracles but also meteorological computer systems and measuring devices. The fact that we can watch a weather forecast on Thursday or Friday and then decide whether there will be enough sun to justify a trip to the coast on the weekend—it's absolutely crazy!

CW: You have been accused of an ontological or ontologizing media materialism that is epistemologically untenable.

FK: The term *ontologizing* is daft because it smacks of intentionality. If you want to remain loyal to the *prima philosophia* [first philosophy],

then you have to remain on the level of Aristotle's final categories. It doesn't make much sense to doubt that this thing here doesn't exist. There are ears and there are eardrums. I've just come off an inflammation of the middle ear. I don't think that I merely construct my world.

CW: What about your concept of media?

FK: I only started working on the conceptual history very late. Initially, I simply took the concept from McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. In the Germany of 1964 that was a book that broke with established ideas. Thanks to Adorno, everybody decided that it was wrong. But I decided, no, it's not wrong!

CW: You claim only those technologies are media that are able to process, transmit, and store data. German literature, for instance, does that, as the only medium around 1800. Media in the plural come into being around 1900 with the gramophone, film, and the typewriter, only to now disappear in the universal medium, the computer . . .

FK: Because all media are collapsing into it. There are physiological-physical computer interfaces that you can continue to regard as media. But inside, in the realm of hardware and software, there's nothing imaginary. Along these lines: media are the visible sides, turned toward laypersons and others, of a world that science invokes as the *dark side of the moon.*

CW: Professor Kittler, could you, in closing, once more summarize what you do when you are doing media studies?

FK: An up-to-date history of being, so to speak. I do believe that my work has given rise to a relatively precise type of historical research in which we are currently the world leaders. The Americans are better when it comes to the history of science. But I am not impressed by the fact that they keep severing their ties to philosophy, of which they presumably are quite proud.

CW: So the philosophical heritage marks the difference?

FK: Indeed. Otherwise, people wouldn't have been so keen on translating all this—by now, into nine or ten languages. That's something to be proud of.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. Throughout this interview *Medienwissenschaften*, which should be rendered as "media science" (if there were such a disciplinary designation), will be translated as the more innocuous and docile "media studies."

2. In most cases the *Habilitationsschrift* (habilitation thesis), which under the old German university regulations was necessary in order to advance to the professorial ranks, had to be accepted by a committee of three readers. In the case of Kittler's *Discourse Networks*, opinions were so divided that no less than nine reports were necessary. In an equally unprecedented move, the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* (vol. 6, no. 1 [2012]: 114–92) has now published the readers' reports.

3. Kittler is referring to his essay "Carlos als Carlsschüler" ("Carlos as a Student of the Carlsschule"), in *Unser Commercium: Goethes und Schillers Literaturpolitik* (*Our Commercium: The Literary Politics of Schiller and Goethe*), ed. Wilfried Barner, Eberhard Lämmert, and Norbert Oellers (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1984), 241–73. For a short English introduction, see Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Implosion and Intoxication: Kittler, a German Classic, and Pink Floyd," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, nos. 7–8 (2006): 75–78.