

In Memoriam: Friedrich A. Kittler, 1943–2011

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Friedrich A. Kittler, Professor Emeritus of Aesthetics and Media Studies at the Humboldt University, died 18 October 2011, following a protracted illness (fig. 1). He was sixty-eight years old. In a career that spanned more than three decades and well over one hundred publications, Professor Kittler contributed to a profound reassessment of literary and media production. At the center of his work was the controversial claim that “media determine our situation.”¹

The conventions of obituaries and elegies seem ill suited to praising an author who consistently exhorted his readers to eschew the mirage of the author in favor of an empirical analysis of the apparatuses, procedures, institutions, and techniques that regulate discourse. Even so, a brief summary of the life and work attributed to the name “Friedrich A. Kittler” is in order. Friedrich Adolf Kittler was born in Rochlitz, Saxony, in 1943. During his childhood, his mother would sometimes take him to visit the site where engineers had devised the V2 rocket, and he carried memories of World War II and the subsequent occupation throughout the rest of his life. In his sweeping accounts of media and technological change in the twentieth century, both the war the rockets would return as protagonists. In 1958, his family fled to West Germany. From 1963 until 1972 he studied Romance languages, German, and philosophy at the University of Freiburg. He subsequently taught at his alma mater as a graduate assistant while completing his postgraduate studies.

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1. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. xxxix.

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FIGURE 1: Friedrich Kittler in Paris, Café de la Paix. Photo by Isabell Schrickel.

Kittler gained international recognition for his 1985 book *Aufschreibungssysteme, 1800/1900*, originally prepared for his habilitation. The text proved so vexing and controversial that it had to be reviewed by a team of thirteen senior professors (instead of the usual committee of three) before finally being accepted—ruefully, by some accounts—as a worthwhile contribution to the study of German literature.² In it, he proposed a radical reinterpretation of romanticism and modernism as two distinct modes of discursive production whose style and logic derived from what could be translated as the “notational systems” or “discourse networks” peculiar to

2. The official protocols of materials presented by Kittler and his supervisors as part of the defense and evaluation available as Gerhard Kaiser et al., “[Habitationsverfahren],” ed. Ute Holl and Claus Pias, *Zeitschrift Für Medienwissenschaft* 6, no. 1 (2012): 114–92.

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their epochs. He defined these networks as “technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data.”³ According to Kittler, in the early nineteenth century the universal alphabet, the techniques of maternal instruction, and the rise of widespread literacy were among the most decisive features of a discourse network that produced the techniques of authority and interpretation characteristic of the great romantic works. Kittler argued that the authors of these texts—most notably Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—were artifacts or illusions of this system of textual production and reception rather than the immaculate origins and originators of meaning. Taking eccentric inspiration from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the madman Daniel Paul Schreber, Kittler argued that twentieth-century literature was dislocated by technical media systems that destabilized authors and psyches alike. Despite the lukewarm reception of Kittler’s thesis by some of his supervising professors, the book became a sensation in literary studies and a foundational text for the then-emerging field of cultural studies.

His subsequent book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) elaborated and radicalized his earlier analysis to develop a new approach to media history based on specifying, in ever-greater detail, the networks of inscriptions, transmission, and receptions (what other critics might refer to as novels, movies, musical recordings, or psychoanalytic case studies) that developed in and around a host of modern media. Though often seen as a celebration of the end of the written word—Kittler claimed that media had shattered the monopoly of writing on modern culture—*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* mapped out new methods by which literary criticism could extend its analysis to laboratories, factories, mathematics, circuit boards, or any other site for the recording, processing, or reception of inscriptions.

In 1987, Kittler accepted an appointment as Professor of Modern German Literature at Ruhr University in Bochum. He attracted a following of loyal students. He, along with contemporaries including Norbert Bolz, Wolfgang Hagen, Christoph Tholen, and Manfred Schneider, initiated what would come to be known in the English-speaking world as *German media theory*. The validity of the term, as well as its identification with Kittler, remains controversial.⁴ Kittler himself defined his methods as an

3. Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford, Calif., 1990), p. 369.

4. For more on these debates and disputes, see Eva Horn, “Editor’s Introduction: ‘There Are No Media,’” *Grey Room* 29 (Winter 2008): 6–13; and Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 30 (Nov. 2013): 67–70.

approach to media research and culture that—in contrast to the Frankfurt School’s preoccupation with ideology and Anglo-American media scholars’ focus on representations—concentrated upon the medial and technical conditions of culture.⁵ This technicist preoccupation was supported by an unrelenting commitment to reading, rereading, and reinterpreting the great works of German and European philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, G. W. F. Hegel, and Aristotle.

Six years later, in 1993 a new professorship in Aesthetics and Media Studies was established at the Humboldt University in Berlin expressly for Professor Kittler. The seminars held by Kittler and his graduate advisees gained renown for their provocative claims and enigmatic subject matter. Some claim his courses rivaled the Berlin club scene of the 1990s for their intoxicating effects. In the early 2000s Professor Kittler began a massive multi-book project dedicated to studying the interwoven development of music and mathematics since the ancient Greeks. He taught his final course at the Humboldt University in 2010.

Professor Kittler gleefully confounded the efforts of admirers and opponents to pigeonhole his thought. Ever skeptical of the attempt to trace a linear route from the messy materiality of the text to the idealism of authorial intentions, Kittler once told an interviewer, “In my writings, one of the most important ideas is that there are no such things as thoughts. There are only words.”⁶ Though accused by some of substituting literary and aesthetic sensibilities with technological procedures, he wrote with a sense of poetry and joy unmatched by his more orthodox contemporaries in literary criticism. Even as he was labeled the father of a distinctly German approach to media theory, he traced much of his own methodology to dialogues with colleagues in France and the United States.⁷ And although he played a leading role in importing new American and French ideas into the German academy during the 1980s and 1990s, in his last public lecture he railed against technocratic reforms that substituted German educational traditions with standardized international norms.⁸

Kittler often likened systems of media and notation to technologies for storing the dead, and a frequent theme of his research was the tendency of

5. For more on the postwar contexts of Kittler’s research, including his opposition to the methods of the Frankfurt School, see Bernhard Siegert, “Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 30 (Nov. 2013): esp. pp. 53–55.

6. Kittler, “From Discourse Networks to Cultural Mathematics: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler,” interview by John Armitage, *Theory, Culture and Society* 23 (Dec. 2006): 23.

7. See *ibid.*, pp. 18, 20–23, 26.

8. See Stefan Hölzgen, “Friedrich Kittler - Abschied von der Sophienstraße,” 18 July 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=csDCdqU-DGY

media to outlive its so-called authors. In his characteristically enigmatic style that conjoined philosophical analysis, canny tautology, and a devilish empiricism, he once observed that “printed laments over the death of Man or the subject always arrive too late.”⁹ While some read in such claims a virulent antihumanism, his friends and colleagues discerned in them the operations of a gay science indefatigably inspired by the eros of the printed letter.¹⁰ They heard in his invitation to exorcise the humanities of its ghostly authors—an *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften*—not the call of a morose posthumanism but a lively celebration of poetry and music that transcended the individual human body and lived on so long as there were readers and listeners willing to act as faithful receivers.

Friedrich A. Kittler is dead. May his words live on.

9. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 370.

10. See Siegert, “Cultural Techniques,” pp. 50–51.