

# On Friedrich Kittler's 'Authorship and Love'

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## Abstract

This article provides a short introduction to Friedrich Kittler's 1980 essay 'Authorship and Love' by showing how it fits into the development of Kittler's thought. The stark contrast between superficially similar scenes in Goethe's *Werther* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, each of which is said to represent fundamentally different conceptualizations of authorship and love, is a revealing instance of Kittler's distinctive and polemical appropriation of French post-structuralism as well as of his subsequent switch from discourse analysis to media theory. Ultimately, 'Authorship and Love' even points ahead to Kittler's final work on music and mimesis in ancient Greece.

## Keywords

authorship, Dante, discourse analysis, Goethe, Kittler, love

## Eviction Notice

'Authorship and Love' is vintage early Kittler: ingenious, erratic, one-sided and intriguingly abrasive. Among the last of his major essays to be translated into English, it documents his shift from the discourse analysis of the 1970s to the media theory of the 1980s. It was first presented in late 1978 as part of an interdisciplinary lecture series at the University of Freiburg, and published two years later in a collection for which Kittler devised his most memorable title: *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften*. Usually translated as 'Expelling the Spirit from the Humanities', a more congenial rendition would be 'Kicking So-called Man out of the Humanities'.

Expelling, banning, ousting, booting, casting out: the title of the collection reveals the spirit of the essay. 'Authorship and Love' is an eviction notice. But who is the addressee? Who or what is this *Geist* under orders to vacate the premises? An illegal squatter? A once reliable tenant

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no longer able to pay the rent? The mistreated victim of an enforced expropriation? And if *Geist* is given the pink slip and forced to hit the road, what happens to the abandoned *Geisteswissenschaften*? Who moves in? What takes over?

Part of Kittler's provocation is to blend two meanings of *Geist* located at different ends of a broad semantic spectrum. The *Geist* in *Geisteraustreibung* – the German word for exorcism – is a ghost, demon or phantom, a troubling presence that needs to be removed from a space where it does not belong. Tapping into an etymological vein as rich as it is revealing, we can add that *Geist* is closely related to *Gast* (guest); and both, in turn, are related to 'host' and Latin *hostis* (enemy). This *Geist* is a guest turned ghost, a friendly visitor that has become a hostile visitation. The *Geist* in *Geisteswissenschaften*, however, comes closer to mind and spirit. The term invokes a quintessentially human quality, the imposing penthouse perched at the top of human self-consciousness. Kittler's first act of conceptual impudence is to suggest that the latter *Geist* resembles the former and hence deserves the same expulsatory treatment. His home discipline – the study of German (or any other) literature – is in need of an exorcism. Humanists are possessed; humanism labours under dark spells; the Humanities are a haunted house of letters.

The second provocation consists of a simple inversion of Christianity's most famous exorcism, as recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. To make sure everyone gets the point, Kittler begins his introduction to the volume by retelling the story (Kittler, 1980: 7). In the country of the Gadarenes on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus encounters a man possessed. The gospels do not agree on the number of men and spirits involved, but it doesn't matter given that the one or more soon mushroom into an undifferentiated throng. Challenging the spirit or the spirits, Jesus asks: 'What is thy name? And he answered, saying: My name is Legion: for we are many' (Mark 5:9). The lemming ending is well known:

So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us go away into the herd of swine. And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters. (Matthew 8:31–32)

Kittler has the singular and the plural change place. Where the gospels praise the ouster of the dirty many so that the cleansed one may reign, he advocates the ouster of the imperious one so that the unruly many may frolic. Out with monolith, in with the multitude. Suffer the stampeding pigs to enter your head and your discipline.

*Plus ça change . . .*

There is a Deleuzian flavour to this preference for the modular many over the insulated one – a flavour also noticeable in some of the more delirious prose passages of Kittler's essay. While Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari did not occupy a prominent place in the well-staffed French section of his personal pantheon (they had committed the serious offence of being too critical of Lacan), 'Authorship and Love' contains respectful nods to their *Anti-Oedipus* as well as to Pierre Klossowski, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and André Glucksmann. Back then none of these names, and Glucksmann's least of all, would have met with fulsome approval from a leftist German academic audience. 'Authorship and Love' was as much an exorcism of an obsolete humanist *Geist* as an invitation to the emergent post-structuralist *Zeitgeist*. Thirty-odd years later it reads like a crowded bulletin from the theory wars of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when so-called French Theory received a much rougher welcome in Germany than it did in North America (Winthrop-Young, 2011: 17–24). The suicidal porcine descent into the adjacent waters found its counterpart in the headlong rush of French *maîtres penseurs* and *nouveaux philosophes* into neighbouring Germany.

But what is the essay about? Reduced to its barest essentials it is a riff on the old truism that one and the same at different times is not one and the same. Around 1300, love and authorship – each on its own and in their relationship to each other – were something altogether different from what they were around 1800; and now they are once again changing. That is, admittedly, not a revolutionary insight, neither today nor in 1978. The scandalous *novum* was the combined Foucauldian and Lacanian depth at which Kittler located the differences. The many historical appearances of love – including that most successful variant, the exclusive connection between two romantically isolated components of a social system – involve more than the changing discursive constructions of a pulsating libidinal or emotive energy running underneath history like a subterranean river. The many appearances of authorship, in turn, involve more than the changing legal and economic reconfigurations of an ahistoric source of originality and creative achievement. What the traditional Humanities may be willing to acknowledge as contingent cultural constructions are, as Kittler would have it, surface effects of a far more basic reshaping of the very foundations love and authorship depend on – namely, desires, subjects and that highly receptive inscription surface called the human body.

To make the point, Kittler borrows a prominent move from Foucault's playbook. Modelled on the contrast between the torture and execution of the failed regicide Robert-François Damiens and the allegedly more enlightened and humanitarian surveillance structure

envisaged by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (see Foucault, 1979), Kittler juxtaposes two superficially similar literary scenes as on a deeper level, incompatible. Scene I: In Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, in the second circle of hell containing the Whirlwind of Lovers, Dante encounters the doomed adulterous couple Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta who, while jointly reading about the tryst between Lancelot and Guinevere, are seized by the desire to set aside the book and re-enact its content. '*Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante*' (that day we did not read any further), Francesca recounts, whereupon they are discovered and murdered by her husband. Scene II: In Goethe's *Sufferings of Young Werther*, the high-strung eponymous hero dances a waltz with the object of his desires, the already betrothed Lotte. Interrupted by thunder they jointly gaze out at the stormy clouds, at the sight of which they both remember a famous ode by the beloved poet Klopstock. While this poetically mediated blissful meeting of minds entails neither sex nor murder (though Werther will eventually kill himself), there is lots of eye contact and synchronized sighing. Scene I: An authorless text acts as a virus that infects the body of its readers to reproduce itself. Scene II: A text by a celebrated author acts as a drug that allows intoxicated readers to partake in the spirit of authorship. Scene I is about words that make bodies make love; Scene II is about the meaning behind the words attributed to an author that enables a communion of souls.

Nothing, then, has remained the same. The single word love, which we hear so timelessly, can neither bridge the opposition nor conceal it. There are different bodies with different gestures, different organs and different adventures; bodies that come to each other in different times. (Kittler, 2015: 4)

The remainder of the essay probes the changes that were necessary for this fundamental change of reading practices. How did authors rise above heroes? Why do we process texts as deposits of meaning betraying the former rather than as behavioural manuals for mimicking the latter? What cultural shifts had to occur for the author to be 'not only the victim but also the agent of individualization', given that he now speaks 'in his own words in order to enable his readers to do the same' (2015: 19)? And how can we write and read texts that are, paradoxically, 'for all people in general *and* for each person in particular' (2015: 20)? The answer to the latter question is love. Somehow, love comes to act as a strange attractor of signification, a delusion of individualized address that an author who does not know me is nonetheless speaking to *me* and that this communication must be meaningful. This, in turn, raises the question of what adventures language itself had to undergo to be capable of this feat. Here, 'Authorship and Love' offers the chamber version of what will receive the full symphonic treatment in the first part of *Discourse*

*Networks* (Kittler, 1990: 5–173). All the themes are there, including the most important one: the interlocking network of language acquisition practices, pedagogical routines, literary protocols and philosophical packaging that together turn language into a ‘general, purified and homogenous medium’ (1990: 36; further see Winthrop-Young, 2011: 32–4) and equip those who use it with *Geist* and soul: that is, a CPU (central processing unit) for individualized speech production. Where once bodies were programmed in virally enforced repetitions, newly produced souls interact in a great cultural machinery circulating love and meaning.

... *plus c’est la même chose*

Those who vigorously adopt a particular methodology stand to inherit its mistakes, especially when they believe otherwise. Kittler was well aware of Foucault’s ‘blunders’ and ‘escapades’ but claimed that he had averted them by redeploing Foucault’s approach on a smaller, more ‘regional’ scale (Kittler and Weinberger, 2012: 383). Leaving aside the fact that in his later, ‘Greek’ years Kittler indulged in techno-cultural surveys of truly occidental proportions, it is doubtful whether the more modest analyses of his younger days are free of Foucauldian fallacies. Take the separation that assigns the physicality of mimetic reading to Dante’s *Inferno*, while Goethe’s *Werther* is said to be governed by the new, spiritualized reading practices. The separation works so well because Kittler, after drawing his initial distinction, turns into his own Maxwell’s Demon. A partition is established and then everything that does not belong on one side – above all, the problematic connection between reading, mimesis and physicality in *Werther* – is transferred to the other. First you draw the distinction, then you redistribute matters in such a way as to justify the boundary.

There are several cubic metres of Goethe scholarship to show that matters are not that simple. *Werther* is as sentimental a creature as he is physical. With the exception of world literature’s supreme slacker, Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov*, no other protagonist in the history of the novel spends as little time in an upright position. *Werther* is constantly kneeling, stumbling, falling, prostrate in the grass, flat on his back, or crawling around on all fours. In addition, the novel features copious amounts of sighing, moaning, weeping, wringing of hands, clutching of breasts and crying in laps, a lot of which is caused by reading. Like *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, Goethe’s novel is a very good read about the dangers of bad reading. Time and again *Werther* is physically affected by texts, and the darker the reading matter (as in the case of Ossian), the more debilitating its impact. In the end he commits suicide with a copy of Lessing’s *Emilia Galotti* at his side.<sup>1</sup> We have to assume, then, that prior to his suicide

he read a drama featuring a heroine who commits suicide because she has read that suicide is what virtuous maidens resort to when their virtue is in jeopardy. In Goethe's novel, then, texts are no less viral than in Dante's epic. In the case of *Werther*, however, matters were further exacerbated by the perceived threat addressed by Goethe himself in the novel's second edition – that sensitive readers were as prone to imitate Werther as Paolo and Francesca were to re-enact the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. Rather than representing a new episteme fundamentally different from that which governed the reading practices of the High Middle Ages – in other words, rather than being located *after* a great divide – *Werther* is a text that helps to construct and usher in a new regime of spiritualized, message-seeking reading by exaggerating the dangers of old, mimetic and body-programming exposure to texts. Goethe's novel is itself an exorcism bent on expelling the spirits of bad reading.

All of this is so well known that German majors can recite it in their sleep, yet it hardly appears in 'Authorship and Love'.<sup>2</sup> This cavalier disregard for accumulated disciplinary wisdom helps explain why Kittler the Germanist incurred as much resentment from his peers as did Kittler the media theorist. However, rehashing accusations of Kittler's imperious sloppiness is less interesting than probing the implications he had in mind. The shortcomings of 'Authorship and Love' highlight two of his life-long concerns: the interdiction of continuity and the extension of the human inscription surface. For Kittler, the Foucauldian emphasis on deep epistemic ruptures serves to preclude the continuous growth of any grand historical actor, whether it be the middle class, the Enlightenment, freedom, the revolution, or the subject. Where the many mingle, the one cannot grow. No *Geist* emerges where words and bodies jostle. The limits imposed on historical continuity, however, are counterbalanced by an extension of the human inscription surface, which is clearly a Lacanian legacy. Kittler never wavered from his belief that our mind and thoughts (that better, higher *Geist*) are made up of language. 'In my writings, one of the most important ideas is that there are no such things as thoughts. There are only words' (Armitage, 2006: 23). As a result, new ways of acquiring and processing words – and, most importantly, new ways of inducting children into language – will fundamentally reshape those who speak and write. Once you accept this premise, the programmability of humans increases exponentially. 'Authorship and Love' is an attempt to marshal a Foucauldian analysis of discourse in support of Lacan's famous formula (and one of Kittler's preferred mantras) that 'the slightest alteration in the relation between man and his signifier [...] changes the whole course of history by modifying the moorings that anchor his being'. In short, where one and the same at different times is no longer one and the same, each one and the same in its own time is a contingent constellation of many parts.

## The Dark Side of *Bildung*

In 2004 Klaus Theweleit published a book on soccer containing one of those baffling claims that give so-called German Media Theory its inimitable flavour. The greatest generational change, he writes, took place in 1956/57 when, much to the delight of German teenagers, the British Forces Network started broadcasting the Top Ten: Buddy Holly to Chuck Berry, Petula Clark to Peggy Lee, Fats Domino to Elvis. And with that, fascism was overcome. Not merely defeated – that had been accomplished a decade earlier by military means – but eradicated on a level out of reach of all T-34s and B-52s. If, as Theweleit had argued at length in *Male Fantasies* (1987), one of the core features of fascism was the construction of hardened male bodies containing men ‘not yet fully born’, who project their inner chaos onto a world they feel compelled to destroy, then any viable attempt to overcome fascism had to operate on this deep level. It had to challenge and undo the inscription of fascism into bodies. How was this achieved? Not by carpet bombing, denazification trials or economic recovery plans, but by means of new music in new media formats. Blues and early rock and roll were able to free desires and bodies from armoured fascist constraints (see Theweleit, 2004: 56–8).

Three points are worth noting. First, claims like these have to be seen against a history of German collective experiences in which media structures, from the 18th-century attempts to culturally construct a politically not yet existing nation by means of books and letters to the Nazi propaganda apparatus and beyond, appear first and foremost as instances of collective homogenization (see Winthrop-Young, 2006). When it comes to severing the fascist mooring of our being, Buddy Holly is of greater use than Jürgen Habermas. Second, it is interesting to note that the impact of new music delivered in new media formats that Theweleit deploys against fascism is, at the very end of ‘Authorship and Love’, deployed by Kittler against the humanist subject, when he claims that ‘the new media [...] have overwhelmed our literacy’, which will allow for new coincidences ‘between body parts and body signs, between men and women’ under a clear blue sky (2015: 24). Indeed, Kittler’s diagnosis that ‘[w]e become individuals: character as armour against a delirium’ (2015: 17), comes very close to Theweleit’s account of the psycho-physical life of fascists. Both claims, in turn, stem from one and the same source. We are dealing with attempts to process, retain and make intellectual use of the cultural legacy of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s (see Winthrop-Young, 2011: 24–26).

Third, both claims are further indications of the extension of the human inscription surface. ‘Authorship and Love’ is a cusp paper that straddles the divide between Kittler’s discourse-analytical and media-theoretical stage. It is interesting to note that the term *media*, subsequently so important to Kittler, does not appear until the very end in

the context of ‘new media’. But, unnamed, it was always there, like a ghost that has not yet made its full appearance. Think of media as a systemic property that arises from the way in which the argument proceeds. ‘Media’ is not simply a further dimension, something technical that is added from the outside (or the underneath), it emerges from the analyses of the interplay between alphabetization, language acquisition, reading lessons, copyright disputes, the ideology of creativity and so on. In order to establish a clear distinction between Dante’s world of bodies and Goethe’s world of souls, Kittler had to imply a level on which this distinction takes place. A minor phrase gives it away. In the context of the print products of the *Goethezeit* Kittler speaks of ‘the book as media technology’ (2015: 20), which is the first time ‘media’ appears. Exactly: books by Dante and Goethe and songs by Leonard Cohen are all media, which is precisely what allows the media theorist to differentiate them.

With this in mind, it may be time to rethink the baseline agenda of the German Media Theory™ primarily associated with Kittler. Ultimately, ‘Authorship and Love’ is less concerned with books or bodies, discourses or media, than with education. But that term is not strong enough. At rock bottom the essay is about something Kittler inevitably scoffs at: *Bildung*. Better translated as ‘formation’, *Bildung* comes with all the humanist and metaphysical ghosts Kittler wants to exorcise, such as notions of human perfectibility, of souls to be nudged and spirits to be nurtured, of refinements to be acquired and cultural heights to be scaled by stepping on piles of good books. Yes, all that goes to the biblical pigs, but the imprint or range of the concept remains. Theorists like Kittler and Theweleit – to whom we could add Peter Sloterdijk, Cornelia Vismann, Bernhard Siegert, Wolfgang Ernst, Markus Krajewski and many more – explore the dark side of *Bildung*. The humanist proponents of the latter had conjured up hallowed domains of inscription and instruction – now it is a matter of showing what is really operating in those spaces. Where *Bildung* had spoken of souls and spirits, media theory speaks of bodies and machines; where *Bildung* spoke of enlightenment and emancipation, autonomous subjects and the stepping-out and up into freedom, media theory speaks of programmes and algorithms, of self-guiding missiles and paradoxical commands of a free will (which is at the heart of the Glucksmann quote). Making full use of the German language’s proclivity for meandering compounds, ‘Authorship and Love’ could be labelled an exercise in *Bildungstechnikenanalyse* – the analysis of the techniques and technologies of (individual and collective) formation.

### ‘Place me on Sunium’s marbled steep’

But let us end on a more positive, indeed loving note. Love, after all, is part of the essay’s title; and love is what Kittler claimed to be talking about in the final years of his life when he was done talking about war



(see Armitage, 2006: 30). ‘Authorship and Love’ not only bears witness to Kittler’s move from text- and discourse-related studies into the world of analogue and digital hardware, in its final paragraph it leapfrogs into the Greek world of Kittler’s unfinished magnum opus, *Music and Mathematics*. Much of what is rolled out in the first two volumes of the latter (see Kittler, 2006, 2009) is already there, waiting to be elaborated. The blue sky invoked at the end of ‘Authorship and Love’ will return as the blue Aegean sky at the beginning of Kittler’s pilgrimage to the Hendrix–Heidegger world of ancient Greece. Leonard Cohen, whose ‘Yesterday’s Man’ Kittler uses to announce the dissolution of armoured subjects into a ‘wilderness’ of sex and signs, will be replaced by Syd Barrett, Jim Morrison and all the other avatars that brought back the many gods sidelined by the oppressive One. But most important, a great recursive cycle will be completed. The infection of bodies by texts described by Dante, the act of mimetic reading that has bodies make the love described by words, approximates what Kittler in the end took to be the very meaning of the word *mimesis*: to make like the gods did when they made us.<sup>3</sup> This did not take place in the whirlwinds of a Christian hell but under clear pagan skies; and it does not involve ‘literature’ and ‘authors’ acting as ghosts that suffocate words under assumed meanings, but an ongoing sequence of physical encounters:

The chain of these repetitions ... transforms love into song. And for a good reason, indeed for the best in the world: Without gods making love there would be no mortals, without parents making love there would be none of us children. Thus only gratitude and repetition remain. As long as the Greeks were singing rather than perpetrating speeches or literature, this was the meaning of *μίμησις*, dance as an imitation of the gods. And the gods made love. (Kittler 2006: 128).

So maybe it is appropriate to end where Kittler ended:

So come, my friends, be not afraid.  
We are so lightly here.  
It is in love that we are made; In love we disappear

Leonard Cohen, ‘Boogie Street’.

## Notes

1. For a media-theoretically informed analysis of *Werther* as one of the supreme examples of texts that kill see Andree (2006). Andree connects texts that readers read before killing themselves to texts readers read before killing

others (e.g. Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's obsession with Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent*). As is well known, the alleged *Wertherfieber* was fuelled by Goethe turning a factual suicide case into literature. Mimetic reading is reinforced by turning reality into a fiction that can then all the more easily be turned back into reality – a criss-crossing of boundaries that comes closer to the mimetic reading of Paolo and Francesca than to the sublime co-autoeroticism of Werther and Lotte.

2. For a more subtle reading of the intertextual relationship linking Dante to Goethe, with special emphasis on the parallels between the whirlwind and the thunderstorm scenes, see Bohm (2002). Bohm is right to argue that Dante's Francesca/Paolo scene is alluded to in *Werther* not only in the Klopstock epiphany but also in Werther's physically engrossed reading of Ossian which, in turn, physically affects Lotte.
3. Further see Winthrop-Young (2011: 96–102). As Claudia Breger (2006: 122–123) has pointed out, these visions of (a resolutely heterosexual) plenitude not only harken back to the countercultural reveries of Kittler's student days but also move him closer to his bugbears in Frankfurt than to his Parisian *maîtres penseurs* (especially the lack-obsessed Lacan):

[Kittler's] romantic fantasy of a divine fullness [...] resonates with the programmatically anti-repressive developments of psychoanalysis generally associated with the student movement of 1968 and left-wing politics in its wake. Kittler's thinking thus joins forces with some of his favorite opponents in German academia, including Herbert Marcuse, who re-centered Heidegger's ontology of ecstasy around the sexual theme omitted by the master himself.

In Greece, under the priapic endorsements of the great goddess Aphrodite, even Adorno's Frankfurt and Kittler's Freiburg may embrace in loving union.

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**The English version of Kittler's essay on 'Authorship and Love', translated by Matthew J. Fraser, is also available in *Theory, Culture & Society*.**

**An e-special issue, featuring these and other articles by and on Friedrich Kittler, edited and introduced by Jussi Parikka and Paul Feigelfeld, is also available in *Theory, Culture & Society*.**