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## Kittler, Friedrich

GEOFFREY WINTHROP-YOUNG

Considered one of the most important contemporary theorists in his native Germany, Friedrich Kittler (b. 1943) is best known for his concept of “discourse networks,” defined as “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store and process relevant data” (Kittler 1990 [1985]). Following the translation of *Discourse Networks* (1990[1985]) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999[1986]) and the publication of the collection *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (1997), he has also acquired a considerable following in the English-speaking world, especially among those working on media and the intersection of poststructuralism and technoculture.

Kittler studied at the University of Freiburg, where he worked as a German lecturer from 1976 to 1986. Following an appointment at the University of Bochum (1987–93), he was named chair of Media Aesthetics at the Humboldt University of Berlin. The author of well over a dozen books and scores of papers that range from Plato to Pynchon, Kittler retired from teaching in 2008.

According to Kittler, cultures are large-scale information-processing machineries characterized by historically differing social and material techniques that determine the

input, throughput, and output of data. Obviously, media are central to such an approach, yet it took a while before Kittler began to tackle media-technological issues. Initially, he described discourse networks as discursive rather than as medial regimes, with an emphasis on language, not on sound- and image-recording technologies. In a move highly representative of the difficult German reception of French post-structuralism (Holub 1992; Winthrop-Young & Gane 2007), Kittler merged the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault with Jacques Lacan’s revision of Freudian psychoanalysis. Foucault’s early view of history as a radically discontinuous succession of epistemes, each possessing its very own order of speech, was complemented by Lacan’s insistence that humans, rather than being in command of language, are spoken by it. On this view, even seemingly natural phenomena such as the familial order, or the notion that we are autonomous subjects boasting an ineffable selfhood, are the effect of signifying chains that ensnare and inscribe individuals. As analyzed in the first half of *Discourse Networks*, this is what happened in the so-called Discourse Network 1800, which roughly coincides with the epoch named after its most famous (and typical) representative, the Age of Goethe.

A fundamental change occurred with the arrival of the Edisonian nineteenth-century

communication and storage technologies, which Kittler started to analyze in the early 1980s. Phonography on the one hand and photography and cinematography on the other challenged the supremacy of writing, which itself switched from the continuous flow of ink on paper to the mechanized, discontinuous letter arrangements of the typewriter. The very basis of representation changed. Writing operates by way of a symbolic relationship between words and things, while photos, movies, and sound recordings are (in predigital times, that is) physical effects of the real. Thus, writing lost the natural glamour it had enjoyed in the Discourse Network 1800; as a result, the imaginary edifice of the romantic Discourse Network 1800, with its philosophical menagerie of souls, subjects, truth, and spirit, came to an end and was replaced by the modernist Discourse Network 1900. With the advent of the computer, however, “the formerly distinct media of television, radio and telephone, and mail converge, standardized by transmission frequencies and bit format” (Kittler 1999[1986]). As the medium to end all media, the computer renders the very notion of media questionable. But to Kittler’s dismay, the computer enjoys a reputation similar to that of language: it is viewed as a means, an extravagantly useful tool, but its cunning user-friendliness obscures the fact that we are excluded from its internal operations. We are literally screened off from the fact that we, the alleged makers and masters, are “subjects to gadgets and instruments of mechanical discourse processing” (1997).

Kittler is no stranger to controversy. He has been charged with flagrant anti-humanism and a cynical disregard for any kind of emancipatory social agenda. These objections recall those aimed at the French poststructuralists to whom he is indebted, as well as at Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, the two principal

German influences behind his work. Blanket statements like the notorious opening line of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, “Media determine our situation” (1999[1986]), have provoked charges of technodeterminism similar to those leveled at the Canadian School of Media Theory. Kittler has been accused of fetishizing war by presenting it as the basis of modern media evolution. Feminist critics have argued that for all his analyses of the discursive construction of women as the natural, silent other of men in the Discourse Network 1800, Kittler’s writings tend to perpetuate precisely this image.

Recently, Kittler has begun his most ambitious project, a genealogy of musical and mathematical notation systems ranging from ancient Greece to Alan Turing. So far, only the first half of the first volume of a projected tetralogy has been published (Kittler 2006). Whether this esoteric work will ever be available in English depends in no small degree on how that which has already been translated manages to deal with the numerous reservations about Kittler’s work.

SEE ALSO: Communication and Media Studies; Cyberspace Studies; Foucault, Michel; Lacan, Jacques; McLuhan, Marshall; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Structuralism, Poststructuralism, and Cultural Studies; Technology and Popular Culture

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## Kracauer, Siegfried

JEFF SOLOMON

Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) rose to fame as one of the best-known cultural critics of Weimar Germany before fleeing the Nazi occupation of Europe to re-establish his career in the US. Born to a middle-class German Jewish family in Frankfurt-am-Main, Kracauer was originally trained as an architect, though he also studied sociology and philosophy with Georg Simmel and Max Scheler, informally instructed Theodor Adorno on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and earned his doctorate in engineering in 1914. In 1921, after a disappointing career as an architect, Kracauer turned to journalism full time, first as a freelance writer in the arts and culture section of the trendsetting liberal newspaper, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and then as the paper's editor from 1924 to 1933. Kracauer fled Nazi Germany in 1933 for Paris, where he struggled to earn his living publishing essays, fiction, and longer works of cultural criticism. When Paris fell to the Nazis in 1940, Kracauer was again forced to flee. In 1941, with assistance from Adorno and Max Horkheimer, he relocated to the US, taking a position with the Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Vowing never again to write in his native

German, Kracauer taught himself to write in English and then resumed his career, emerging as one of the most celebrated mid-century voices on film criticism and the philosophy of history. Kracauer was appointed research director of the Empirical Social Research Department at Columbia University in 1951. He died in New York in 1966.

The majority of Kracauer's works written in German first appeared in serialized form within the pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, including the 1922 essay, "Sociology as science," in which he articulated the phenomenological approach that he would apply in his later works. His important writings from this period include his literary analysis, *The Detective Novel* (1925); a collection of essays on the surface features of life under modernity, entitled *The Mass Ornament* (1925[1927]); his first autobiographical novel, *Ginster* (1928); and his ethnographic study of the petit bourgeois class in Berlin, *The Salaried Masses* (1928[1930]). While in Paris, Kracauer completed his second autobiographical novel, *Georg* (1934), and published his social biography of nineteenth-century Paris, *Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* (1937[1935]), a groundbreaking work (often compared to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*) in which he recounts the details of Offenbach's life and music to provide a sweeping cultural analysis of Second Empire Paris.

Upon relocating to New York, and with support from the US government's Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communications, Kracauer produced two studies of Nazi film propaganda, *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film* (1942) and "The conquest of Europe on the screen: The Nazi newsreel, 1939–1940" (1943). He followed these studies with his very well-received (though some have argued, overly deterministic) cultural history of nationalistic German cinema under UFA, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947).

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