

Comments to Jussi Parikka's text "Friedrich Kittler – a media anthropology without the man?"

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Hello, and thanks to John, Steve and Nina for inviting me to stir a discussion around Friedrich Kittler, and thank you to Jussi Parikka for providing us with a provocative opening text.

Kittler is a very influential figure in contemporary media studies, but anthropologists have not felt drawn to his work so far, probably because of his lack of theoretical sympathy for human will when it comes to machines and media. Winthrop-Young (2011:6) writes: "His work will strike many as profoundly asocial, even ahuman, especially when approached in a more idealistic spirit". Parikka opens his text laughing at the fact that we are discussing Friedrich Kittler on an anthropology-based e-list; this is quite a paradox: While anthropology puts people at the center of all knowledge, Kittler believed that 'man' or 'people' are irrelevant outside their expressions through whatever media are or were at their disposal at any given point in time. Reviewing Kittler's life and work, Winthrop-Young (2011) tells us that he often referred to humans as 'so-called-man' or 'little people'.

Why should anthropologists, then, be interested in Kittler's work at all? In his text opening this e-seminar, Jussi Parikka has given us four good reasons and has invited us to put Kittler in the context of his contemporary theorists and writers. I think that two additional reasons are Kittler's undeniable influence and importance in contemporary media theory, and the fact that new fields of inquiry, such as 'media archeology', are almost direct results of his theories and research methodology. If we want to understand contemporary media theory and emerging disciplines related to it, we have to read Kittler.

Unlike Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, which we tend to associate with the MESSAGES inscribed on the media, archaeology for Kittler must be the archeology of media technologies, because, as he famously wrote, "Media determine our situation" (Kittler 1999[1986], xxxix) and "What remains of people is what media can store and communicate" (*Ibid*, xl). In their work on Kittler, Parikka and others have written about the diverging approaches deriving from either putting the media before the message, or putting the message before the media. The results in on our very understanding of history, archaeology, media studies and other social sciences are radically different (See Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, Poster 2001, Whintrop-Young 2006, 2011, Whintrop and Wutz 1999). According to Huhtamo and Parikka (2011), media studies in Germany, influenced by Kittler, have placed media as technology at the center, while scholars affiliating to what these authors call 'the Anglo-American tradition' have chosen to place media as the material result of thought and discourse. Perhaps, as they have suggested, the differences can be traced to Foucault, which could be read as placing either on discourse or on technology "the *loci* where knowledge is tied with cultural and social power" (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, Kindle edition). In other words, when thinking of the relation between, on the one hand, culture and, on the other, media, we can either see media as a result of life and culture, or culture as a result of life AND media. Kittler, arguably, always chose this second option.

Anthropologists have, for decades, considered theoretical positions relatively similar to those of Kittler's, even if less extreme. Kittler believed and argued that human knowledge is always the result of discourse networks, and that, before the advent of mechanical reproduction and electronic media, these networks systematically found expression in books and other technologies of coding (such as poems and songs, which were in fact, according to Kittler, mnemonic devices). Books, then, were systems of information coding and storage. The books and other written materials, in turn, necessarily had an impact on the thinking of those who read them and those who learned about them through others. Reading, pedagogy and the discussion of books are technologies, in the Foucauldian sense of mechanisms exerting effects over human consciousness. In this sense, the materiality of the books, as expression of discourse networks, to some extent conditioned the longevity of

the coded discourse, and the development of newer discourse networks. Old, comprehensible codes, along with the new codes being developed, form the cultural context within which people understand the world (See Kittler 1990[1985] and 1999[1986]). We can recognize here, to some extent, Foucault's concept of the *episteme*, and think of Benedict Anderson's concept of print capitalism as somewhat related to Kittler's technological view of writing and print. For Kittler, velocity and increased precision are the main driving forces for technological development: oral registers through mnemonics were slower and less exact than writing, which was slower and less precise than print. The advent of visual and sound recording, along with the development first of typewriters, and later on, of computers, have made possible a more accurate coding and rendering of information.

Kittler is difficult to read, but his erudition and his detailed knowledge of many and very diverse technologies are mesmerizing. I have particularly enjoyed his constant references to fiction, popular music, films, poems and anecdotes from the lives of artists, writers and philosophers. I recommend his two books *Information Networks 1800/1900* and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* as good starting points. *Information Networks 1800/1900* is a long essay on the idea of information coding, and in particular of reciting, reading and writing, as technologies. It also starts the discussion on recording and film as information devices. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is an essay in three parts assembling a series of texts by other authors. These texts are most enjoyable, and they all register the wonder and impact of the new technologies, told by contemporary observers. While the section on film presents materials that have appeared often in other books and academic writings, the sections 'Typewriter' and 'Gramophone' are very engaging, informative and interesting for anyone working on media, music or information technologies. The section 'Typewriter' quickly moves from the impact of the typewriter on philosophy, fiction and academia, to descriptions of Turing machines, CPUs and ASCII.

A most striking under-argument running through *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is the constant association of technologies with weapons, and technological development as a cycle that seems to take humanity constantly from peace to war and then from war to peace. The book ends with a description of the bombing of Hiroshima. Kittler's affinities with

Thomas Pynchon and Paul Virilio become evident in this text: “Machines operating on the basis of recursive functions produce slow-motion studies not only of human thinking but also of human demise.” In the last pages even fiction, in the form of spy novels spun to hide actual truths, becomes a war weapon. I wish Jussi Parikka during our seminar, and other theorists deriving their insights from Kittler’s work elsewhere could comment more extensively on this dystopic side of Kittler’s work, and on its implications for further theorizing in the field of media. Otherwise, future discussions could build upon Kittler’s unexamined assumption that technological development is necessarily taking us to the end of history, understood as the final self-annihilation of humankind.

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