Friedrich Kittler - a media anthropology without the Man?

By Jussi Parikka

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton

Funnily enough it makes sense; to think anthropology through someone who was adamantly against the notion of Man -- although, indeed, idealised and humanistic notions of Man, and preferred to speak of the so-called-Man instead. Friedrich A. Kittler's insistence to extend the Foucauldian idea of "ends of man" into a technological analysis is made his "anthropology without people" into a highly peculiar, and singular project, that already early on was sure to rub Marxists and sociologist the wrong way, as well as gather around him a group of adoring followers -- at times pejoratively called the "Kittler youth".

I think the most interesting things for us, thinking his legacy whether from the perspective of anthropology, media studies and media archaeology, philosophy of technology etc. are at least following things:

- theoretization through history; Kittler is weirdly empirical for someone who is so much influenced by the high-wave of post-structuralism (he after all studied in Germany in the places which were the first to receive the French influence in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as him being in Freiburg at the same time as Martin Heidegger. But Kittler's Heidegger came through the French detour). Kittler is at times irritatingly wrong in facts, and makes seeming generalisations through Lacan read into media history, but still, one could say he insists on specificity; in order for you to say anything interesting about humanities, modes of knowledge, production of facts, disciplines in academia, or human understood as a perceiving, sensing, thinking, memorising being, you need to account for technology as a mode of a priori, a condition of knowledge in the Foucauldian sense.

- the way he reads the human being: if Foucault was branding archaeology as a way to

account for conditions of knowledge about the Man, then for Kittler we are closer to thinking what are the medial conditions of existing for that knowledge -- as well as for a concrete, material way of sensing the world. The way we see, think and memorise, dream and hallucinate, are conditioned mediatically. Indeed, he tracks down the new formations of the human being through various contexts; partly the "idealisation of bodies", by which he refers to the processes and techniques of standardisation that ranged from technical media to statistics (as part of biopolitics, would Foucault emphasise). Also through case histories of madmen, and such anomalies as the famous early 20th century case of D.P.Schreber, the schizophrenic high court judge, whose memoirs Kittler reads almost like the memoirs of the new technological man.

- software is important, and technical media in general; you have to know a bit about them, and preferably code yourself. Just like you should master key natural languages, you should be able to think and do algorithmically too.

- provoke. Think across disciplinary boundaries, and mix fact and fiction -- but with a rigorous method; read Pynchon as a description of the techno-political and war-ridden 20th century; or then read scientific literature about experimental psychology as a description of what human beings have become at the end of 19th century.

- what has not been investigated to a great extent are the developments parallel, and at times intertwining with Kittler's, since the 1990s or so: primarily the notion of "cultural technique" (Kulturtechnik) is one where a range of people who were colleagues and/or students picked up on something with another connection to anthropology.

For me, and others, Kittler has offered an inspiration for a media archaeological approach to digital culture (see http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520262744 and http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745650258) - in short, recruiting the way we think about new media cultures through old media, in order to track genealogies and surprising openings. Kittler flagged his early approach as interested in an "archaeology of the present" that also accounts for 'data storage, transmission, and

calculation in technological media' (Kittler 1990: 369). These are the media that according to Kittler offered the epistemology of how to think about "humans" in the age of technical media: less as self-governing subjects than subjected to processes of quantification, data gathering, and other procedures of technical media in emerging capitalist cultures.

The later Kittler turned again a bit further away from analysis of computer cultures and software, and technical media; his most recent project, that remained unfinished, was a massive history of mathematics and music; a media historical inquiry into the birth of the vocal alphabet as a form of "coding"/storage, and subsequent long history of intertwining of arts and science. The book project was supposed to end at "Turing age", referring to the computer pioneer Alan M. Turing - but as said, he was never able to conclude this project.

After Kittler's death I published the following:

Friedrich Kittler (1943-2011)

Writing anything after hearing about the death of [Friedrich Kittler](#) (1943-2011) is not really easy, even if it surely will boost the academic publishing industry into a range of publications. Somewhere I read him characterized as the "Derrida of media theory" and where the writer (probablyWinthrop-Young or Peters) added that of course, Kittler would like to be called "Foucault of media theory". But then again, I think he would have liked to be thought of as, well, I guess "Any-Band-Member-of-Pink-Floyd – of Media Theory".

Quite emblematically, as happened with the translation and cultural import of French theory to English speaking academia, things got mixed. German media theory became a general term that mostly hide a lot of differences between writers. Same thing had happened with French Theory when it arrived in the US. In media theory, Kittler became however the leading figure, due to the two translations: in 1990, *Aufschreibesystem* got its English form as *[Discourse Networks](...)* , and in 1999 *[Gramophone Film Typewriter](...)* came out. Meanwhile, his essays started to pour into English language. On computers, literature, psychoanalysis, music and sound, and optical media – the classes he gave in 1999, translated into English later as *[Optical Media](...)* (2010). He wrote a lot, and his amazing expertise from literature to physics and engineering produced something eclectic – a weird world of Pynchon and voltages, of Goethe and dead voices of phonographic recordings, a mix of sex, Rock'n'Roll and philosophy. Pink Floyd was as important to him as Foucault (see the wonderful little book by Winthrop-Young), and he never really believed in Cultural Studies.

We had the honour of hosting [his last talk at Sophienstrasse](...) , and probably his last public talk ever. The Medientheater was jam packed, primarily because of Kittler, talking at the last event of the Sophienstrasse 22 address. Even then he continued along the same line of thought: critique of the standardization of university worlds. He was an adamant defender of the old(er) ideas of university, before the subsuming of the education system to short-term market terms, the creative industries, the psychobabble that is unscientific and leads to a deterioration of intellectual goals. Despite being a fan of "Old Europe", he was against the BA-MA structure reforms (the Bologna process) that offered standards for degrees across Europe. Similarly as he was offering meticulous analysis of the work of standards in computing, he did so in terms of education system, which, as we know, is just another program. It programs us, into suitable subjects – from Goethe-*zeit*, to the neoliberal programming of little entrepreneurs.

For such universities, Heidegger, Deleuze, Whitehead, Kittler might be seen at times too difficult, which means that we should push them more. The legacy of Kittler has

been debated already during his lifetime, with Winthrop-Young in *Kittler and the Media* nicely remarking: "Is there a 'Kittler School'? Yes, but it is not worth talking about. As in the case of Heidegger, clones can be dismissed, for those who choose to think and write like Kittler are condemned to forever repeat him." Instead, continues Winthrop-Young, we need to be aware of the Kittler-effect and the impact he had to so many discussions. For me, personally, this happened through the combination of Kittler and Deleuze; reading groups in the late 1990s in Turku (largely because of a couple of people at the University: professor Jukka Sihvonen, and my friend, colleague Pasi Väliaho, along with our Deleuze-reading group together with Teemu Taira). That provided another road already, one that Kittler never really took, and which lead to thinking technics and Deleuze-Guattarian philosophy in parallel lines. Kittler might have hated that, but that is the point; keeping his legacy alive means new ideas and combinations. What I would like to sustain from his fresh, radical, anarchist ideas are the eclectic method of crisscrossing ontological regimes across science and arts; his keen historical (some would say "archaeological") focus even if not always correct in details; his materiality, and no-nonsense attitude to theories and analysis of for instance digital media. That is much more than most of the current writing can still offer. Of course, there is so much that I refuse to take aboard, but that should be part of any intellectual reading and adaptation.

People often remember his older writings – and the idea of discourse networks, then developed into media theory. Yet, the past years he was occupied with the Greeks and what remained mostly an unfinished project: *Music and Mathematics*. He never reached the final book of the series on Turing-*zeit*, unless somewhere in his study there is a manuscript waiting to be found. Fragments for sure.

The amount of inspiring ideas he was able to pack even to a one sentence – where you were not always sure what it even meant, but you got the affective power of it. One of my favourites was the quote from Pynchon with which he started his Gramophone Film Typewriter: "Tap my head and mike my brain, Stick that needle in my vein".

In a way, Kittler wrote media theory with Heidegger, but also with Pynchon.

Gravity's Rainbow is one key to his early writings, when you realize the style, but also the ontology behind it. Subjectivities wired to technologies, and high physics being the language "behind" the everyday appearance and seeming randomness that is just an effect of the complexity of science and engineering. The V-2 is one reference point for modern technology in general. It has a special relation to human sensorium:

"As the pendulum was pushed off center by the acceleration of launch, current would flow—the more acceleration, the more flow. So the Rocket, on its own side of the flight, sensed acceleration first. Men, tracking it, sensed position or distance first. To get to distance from acceleration, the Rocket had to integrate twice—needed a moving coil, transformers, electrolytic cell, bridge of diodes, one tetrode (an extra grid to screen away capacitive coupling inside the tube), an elaborate dance of design precautions to get to what human eyes saw first of all—the distance along the flight path."

In short, what Guattari summed up in short that "machines talk to machines before talking to humans", for Kittler is an elaborate work of physics and engineering, even before we see what hit us. And hear it afterwards.

Pynchon, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, tie of course to Kittler's other passion where the rocket technology took us after the war. The moon, [Pink Floyd](#) 's moon to be specific. One is almost expecting to hear Kittler's rusty voice whispering at the end, after the crackling LP almost finishes…"There is no dark side of the moon really…as a matter of fact, it's all dark."

(Originally published at http://jussiparikka.net/2011/10/18/friedrich-kittler-1943-2011/)

For other short texts I have written on Kittler, please see:

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/29/friedrich-kittler-technology-education-open-free

An earlier, shorter post on his Optical Media-book translation:

http://jussiparikka.net/2011/08/04/the-physicist-of-media-theory-friedrich-kittlers-optical-media/

In addition, in my forthcoming What is Media Archaeology? I discuss Kittler extensively, for instance his notions of materiality as well as "psychotechnics".

best wishes
Jussi

--
Dr Jussi Parikka
Reader in Media & Design
Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton)
Adjunct Professor/Docent in Digital Culture Theory, University of Turku (Finland)
-