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Book Review: Friedrich Kittler, *Optički mediji. Berlinska predavanja 1999, godine* [Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999], translation: Aleksandra Kostić, Belgrade: Faculty of Media and Communication, Singidunum University, 2018, ISBN 978-86-81042-00-7

Friedrich Kittler was a pioneering and leading figure in “German” media theory (*Mediawissenschaft*) and its international, chiefly Anglo-American reception.

Kittler was born in 1943. Along with his family he moved from the GDR to West Germany in 1958. He studied German, Romance languages, and philosophy, earning his doctoral degree with a dissertation on the Swiss realist novelist and poet Conrad Ferdinand Meyer in 1976. He did his *Habilitation* in the field of modern German literary history in 1984 and the result of that study was his first influential book, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, which was published in German in 1985 and in English in 1990. He was a professor of modern German studies at Ruhr University and aesthetics and media history at Humboldt University of Berlin from 1993 to 2008. He was a visiting lecturer at American universities such as the University of California at Berkeley and Santa Barbara, Stanford, Yale, and Columbia. He died in Berlin in 2011, after a long illness.

Friedrich Kittler was one of the first authors to accept and develop, in the German context, the teachings of French late structuralists and poststructuralists, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. His theoretical, philosophical, literary, as well as musical and film references were rather eclectic; for instance, a reviewer of his book *Musik und Mathematik* chastised his style as ‘Heidegger for hippies’. Indeed, an attentive reader of Kittler’s writings will identify unexpected referential examples in his media and discursive analyses of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s poem ‘Wanderers Nachtlied’, of rock music with songs such as Jimi Hendrix’s ‘Electric Ladyland’, The Rolling Stones’ ‘Sympathy for the Devil’, Pink Floyd’s ‘Brain Damage’, as well as the music of Richard Wagner and György Ligeti; at the same time, his work is also characterised by parallel readings of Hegel and Foucault, Homer, Thomas Pynchon, and William S. Burroughs, as well as studies and discussions of interrelations between various media – for instance, the work *Fahrenheit 451* both as a novel by Ray Bradbury and film by François Truffaut.

Kittler transplanted Foucault's notion of 'the death/demise of the subject' to the domain of the formative impact of media on human existence. The essence of media as a technical device is to re-determine the human senses, whose modified range also alters the metaphors with which humans describe the world that is available to their senses. A consequence of such a belief is that media determine *our* situation, which leads one to conclude that the technological and institutional networks of a given culture allow it to select, store, and process the relevant data that redefine the *human being*. Unlike French theorists, he did not write about structures and, unlike British theorists, he did not identify contextuality, but, rather, pointed to the formative potential of technological and institutional networks and their impacts, which result in individual and collective subjectivisations. The human being is an effect of technology and the changes that occur in the category of the human are conditioned by changes in technology.

The next important step, implied by the foregoing remarks, in understanding Kittler's theory of media is his materialism. Every bit of information, even a sign written on a piece of paper, a slight change of voltage, or a flash of light in the world, or an impact in the fiber-optic cable is a material unit that affects the constitution of a social relation. His technocratic materialism also underscores his claim about the importance of hardware and its primacy over software, which prominently sets him apart from digital theorists such as Lev Manovich. Kittler's assertion that 'there is no software!' is almost analogous to Lacan's claim that 'there is no such thing as meta-language' and points to the event of the material order penetrating or modifying or altering i.e. governing the ostensible non-materiality of an algorithm, software, or, ultimately, number, that is, any kind of communicational message and its influence on the human situation. In programmable media practices, Kittler's endeavour to give interpretative primacy to hardware over software has been interpreted in various ways. Kittler's thought begins in the early period of the 'digital revolution', when hardware held primacy over software – software was an extension of hardware. By contrast, there are interpretations that speak of the materialist paradigm whereby the power of media comes up not in programmable logic, but in implementing programmes in the real world: "Media determine our situation"; in a world that is both social and technological at once. Posited like this, Kittler's materialism comes close to inverting Marx and Engels's thesis that the ultimately determining element in history is 'the production and reproduction of real life', exchanging it for the hypothesis that the determining element is 'the production and reproduction of data', whose non-semantic impacts exceed semantics. This is an intervention that identifies media technologies and cultural techniques with the realisation of formative elements in the construction of various discursive networks.

An important comparative modality of Kittler's theory of media history is the ambivalent attention he devotes to the homology between war and technology: 'The unwritten history of technical norms is a history of war'.

With his book *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999* Kittler pushed the archaeology of media from the domain of literary references into that of interpreting the archaeology – layers and regimes – of optical media, which were becoming increasingly important for Western communication practices. In the introduction to the book, he asserts his position: ‘In contrast, the title *Optical Media* should signal a systematic problem and place the general principles of image storage, transmission, and processing above their various realizations. This general and systematic approach does not result in philosophical abstractions, but rather it reveals underlying structures: when it is made clear first that all technical media either store, transmit, or process signals and second that the computer (in theory since 1936, in practice since the Second World War) is the only medium that combines these three functions – storage, transmission, and processing – fully automatically, it is not surprising that the endpoint of these lectures must be the integration of optical media and the universal discrete machine known as the computer’.

The book comprises three main sections: ‘Technologies of the Fine Arts’ (the techniques of the fine and plastic arts, i.e. painting, sculpture, and graphic art), ‘Optical Media’ (the techniques of photography, film, and television), and ‘Computers’ (digital technologies). The lectures are driven by interpreting the parallel potentialities of art and technique with a view of developing the optical presentation and mediation of that which is irreducible to language or text and enters the field of the visible, which over time grows less and less dependent on observing nature directly or in the natural way. That means that Kittler’s discussion retains and preserves the problematics stemming from the theory and history of technology, along with highlighting the relations between technique and the body, that is, between modern technology and war. Also, these lectures confront the reader with changes in technology and the human approach to the optical – the nature of seeing. For, the fine arts rest on the manual translation/inscription of the visible onto the surface of a piece of paper or canvas. While computer technology ventures beyond the visible into the domain of data manipulation – in Kittler’s words, ‘Digital image processing thus ultimately represents the liquidation of this last remainder of the imaginary’.