

Media Technology as a Blessing or a Curse? Re/Discovering Friedrich A. Kittler

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Abstract:

Literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has compiled 23 essays, which cover the entire range of Kittler's unorthodox explorations of Western media networks and discourses. This edited volume makes some of Kittler's essays available for the first time for the English-speaking public; furthermore, the editor convincingly explicates Martin Heidegger's conception of modern technology as common ground of Kittler's entire oeuvre.

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Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich (Hg.): *The Truth of the Technological World. Essays on the Genealogy of Presence.* Friedrich A. Kittler. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014. 400 S., Hardcover, \$27,95. ISBN: 9780804790680

When the media philosopher Friedrich A. Kittler died in 2011 German academia had lost one of its most prolific – and provocative – scholars. Philologist by profession, Kittler was among the first to study the discursive and material implications of electronic technologies and thereby helped establish the academic discipline media studies in Germany. Kittler has also been favorably perceived in the US. With his major books already translated into English during his lifetime, events like the 2013 Commemorative Colloquium for Friedrich Kittler *The Sirens Go Silent* at New York University indicate the current reinvigorated interest in his work.

Stanford based literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht – an old intellectual companion of Kittler – has endeavored to keep his thinking alive. At first published in Germany (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (ed.): *Friedrich A. Kittler. Die Wahrheit der technischen Welt. Essays zur Genealogie der Gegenwart.* Berlin 2013) this volume collects 23 essays chronologically ranging from 1978 to 2010. The collection covers the entire span of Kittler's academic life and his vast intellectual interests; it deals with the military origins of rock music, sheds light on the significance of the Greek alphabetization or traces "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's *Second World War*". The reader therein experiences Kittler's contagious intellectual energy and genuine lust for thinking off the beaten tracks, which is conveyed through Erik Butler's faithful translation; even the essays previously published in English have been retranslated for this volume. In addition, Gumbrecht provides an epilogue in which he seeks to work out "what is singular – and singularly significant for our present and future – in the works of Friedrich Kittler?" (p. 310). Gumbrecht approaches the oeuvre of Kittler firstly from a genealogical perspective to subsequently trace its underlying conception of truth. He identifies three distinct stages of Kittler's work (cf. p. 309), which are provided as headlines over the respective essays in the German issue's table of contents; they help the reader to better grasp the development of Kittler's thoughts at first sight, but the titles are unfortunately missing from the English version.

Correspondingly, it was as early as in his first phase that Kittler transcended his genuine discipline, German philology, when he interpreted literary and cultural texts from a post-structuralist point of view. Representative of this stage is "Lullaby of Birdland" (p. 31–45) in which he rereads Goethe's "Wanderers Nachtlied" to conclude that it is not primarily the expression of

a Romantic-lyrical "I", but can rather be grasped as a transcription of natural sounds. In his second phase Kittler embarked on the ambitious project to pursue the various histories of Western media technologies. The notorious essay "There Is No Software" (p. 219–230) exposes the concept of software as a misguided projection of human consciousness onto technological devices introduced by greedy corporations; electronic technology would on the contrary consist entirely of material and self-guided hardware. Kittler's pessimistic, often anarchistic essays stemming from this period remain as relevant as ever in our world in which Apple and Facebook have grown to be the most powerful major corporations in human history – yet still operating devoid of any democratic legitimization.

Towards the end of his life Kittler focused on media techniques in ancient Greece. In contrast to the middle period of his media history, which according to Gumbrecht "steers toward an apocalyptic ground zero" (p. 318), Kittler's perception of the origins of European cultural and media history would be rather comforting. His 2008 essay "Martin Heidegger, Media, and the Gods of Greece: De-severance Heralds the Approach of the Gods" (p. 290–303), draws on Heidegger's *History of Being* to re-conceptualize computer technology as "this alliance [...] of hard-and software, of physics and logic, which has taken the place of the gods who have fled far away" (p. 301). Transcending established scholarship on Kittler, Gumbrecht does not prioritize the earlier stages of Kittler's career; instead, he explicates the presence of Heidegger's late philosophy in the third phase to conclude that Kittler's entire work exposes the historical preconditions through which media technology enables the human being to be confronted with the actual facts about the world and its objects (cf. p. 323–329).

In addition to making available some of Kittler's essays for the English-speaking public for the first time, the significance of this volume lies in Gumbrecht's epilogue, which refutes claims of Kittler's apparent media determinism. Gumbrecht convincingly lays bare that Kittler's philosophy, on the contrary, speaks the truth about the extra-ordinary influence of media technology on any kind of subject- and world formation processes. Therefore, this rich and insightful collection is a must-read for anyone interested in applying the stimulating theoretical approaches of Friedrich A. Kittler to the study of culture.