



# Academic Networks 1982/2016: The Provocations of a Reading

FLORIAN SPRENGER

TRANSLATED BY VALENTINE A. PAKIS

In the summer of 1982, Friedrich Kittler submitted his postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) to the then four philosophical faculties of the Albert-Ludwig University in Freiburg. Titled *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*—and later known in English as *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*—the work amounted to 581 pages in typescript. Its author, mischievous as ever, was perhaps already anticipating that it would test the limits of the entire academic process. Two years passed before the appointed committee, having sought eleven instead of the typical three evaluations, was able to make its final decision and, despite one dissenting opinion, bring the process to a positive conclusion. In 1987, Kittler was offered a professorship in modern German literature at the Ruhr University in Bochum, which he left behind in 1993 to become a professor of aesthetics and the history of media at Humboldt University in Berlin. He would hold the latter position until his retirement.

In Kittler's *Habilitation* process it is possible to identify, *in nuce*, many of the aspects that would come to characterize his later academic career. An examination of this historical constellation sheds light, that is, on what Kittler's writings stand for and what they are directed against; it also does much to explain the antagonistic tone that characterized them for so long. The text that follows this article—a preface written after the fact by Kittler and published here in English for the first time—likewise originated in the context of this legendary process. Kittler wrote it to fulfill a rather unusual request to clarify more precisely the approach and methodology of his work and to situate it within contemporary debates. Such basic things, to the consternation of the committee, were not spelled out in the thesis itself. With a gesture of demarcation bordering on arrogance, the text distanced itself from the traditions and schools of its time without, however, explaining or providing any information about its bold new direction. Dismissive of the hermeneutically oriented literary criticism and literary sociology of his contemporaries, and yet no less dismissive of the interpretations of poststructuralism that then prevailed in Germany,

Kittler's work broke down the boundaries not only of German literary studies but of the *Habilitation* process itself. Such behavior may be considered visionary, maniacal, or unscientific; regardless, the apodictic manner with which Kittler simultaneously opened up and occupied a new field of study is nothing if not momentous.

To publish this preface more than thirty years later provides an opportunity to reflect upon the role that this important book has played in establishing a field known as *Medienwissenschaft*.<sup>1</sup> For one, the conditions of Kittler's institutional initiation and entertaining (at least from a distance) *Habilitation* process allow for an analysis of certain *dispositifs* or mechanisms: the rituals of academic careers, the "discourse networks" of thesis committees, the "education machine" of the university (about which, in *Discourse Networks*, Kittler cites Friedrich Nietzsche), and not least the study of German literature around the year 1980.<sup>2</sup> Revisiting this process, moreover, brings to light the extremely turbulent theoretical and political currents of the time, which can be reconstructed today in hindsight. Finally, the opportunity should not be missed to reevaluate the conditions behind the transatlantic translation not only of Kittler's preface but also of his entire approach: What is it about Kittler's works that has been responsible for their warm reception in North America? Are the same inspirations or provocations still being drawn from his ideas today, in various places on both sides of the ocean? And, regarding our understanding of media in the twenty-first century, what perspectives can now be opened up by a text that is more than thirty years old?

Scholars in various fields have recently stressed the need to historicize Kittler and his work not simply as a toolbox for analyzing the materiality of our digital culture, and a number of conferences and publications clearly show that this advice has been taken to heart. The material condition for this has been the availability of Kittler's unpublished papers at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, where Kittler's preface to *Discourse Networks* is kept as well. Yet despite this availability of archival material it is also unclear where such a historicization ought to begin; it is unclear, that is, where any treatment of Kittler belongs in the present. The publication of the text at hand raises this very question: Is its purpose to improve our understanding of a historical context, to enable an understanding of the present, or to retrace the intellectual paths taken by its author? Kittler himself would have perhaps made a case for blending these three aspects. The discursive and technical conditions of a given present influence what it is able to say about a given past, and these power relations, which liberate a person's destiny from the essence of the soul, bind this destiny all the more strongly to the body. Hardly anything was more obvious to Kittler than self-historicizing. Today, accord-

ingly, we find ourselves in the position of having to reconstruct where the plausibility of Kittler's approach originated; that is, the source of its epistemological utility or application. In Kittler's preface such things are expressed with the utmost clarity. And yet some familiarity with the historical context in which the preface was written is necessary, for the insight Kittler offers into his own book—the reading he presents—is more ambiguous than it might seem.

Twenty-five pages in typescript, composed in 1983, revised in 1987, and printed here as a step toward historicization, the text in question is absent from the published version of the book, which was released in 1985 by Fink Verlag and is otherwise nearly identical to the thesis itself. The preface is absent as well from the English translation, which appeared in 1990. The latter translation does include, however, the afterword appended in 1987 to the second edition of the German book, which, despite a few minor differences, can more or less be regarded as a condensed version of the preface at hand, the arguments of which Kittler updated in 1987 after the 1986 publication of his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (as it would be known in English) and thus from a new perspective. Completed in 1983 at the request of his committee, the original preface was made available to the final reviewers as the situation was coming to a head. Beyond being a testament to the intellectual disputes that were taking place in Freiburg, it is evidence of the tensions then prevailing throughout German academia at large.

Ute Holl and Claus Pias took it upon themselves to edit the earlier version of the text, along with the evaluations of Kittler's *Habilitationsschrift*, and they were published for the first time in a 2012 issue of the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*. In their introduction to the evaluations, Holl and Pias underscore that the lasting applicability of Kittler's work lies in the fact that his investigation of the presemantic and media-technical foundations of the production of knowledge has made possible a discussion of "the problems of the discipline on a different systemic level."<sup>3</sup> Employing a sort of guerrilla tactics, Kittler's work brings into focus the very discourse formation that nourishes his own approach: the encroachment of poststructuralism into a hermeneutic science oriented toward mind and meaning. With the goal of determining the place of literature in the discursive formations around 1800 and 1900, Kittler examines the pedagogical institutions that mediated the practices of writing and reading—including the university, which was then keeping watch over his own writing and reading. At issue is the discursive function of literature within a culture's communication and information networks, the operations of which are themselves dependent on media technologies. Thus, the human appears not only as a figure of discourse, as in Michel

Foucault, but also as a media-technical effect of the processes of addressing and operationalization—just as the phenomenon of *Kittler* can likewise be related to the discipline-producing processes of the *Habilitation*, by which he was bestowed an address in the academic network.

Kittler built upon thinking imported from France by shifting from the historical a priori to the technical a priori and by focusing on the material—and not merely discursive—foundations of knowledge, culture, and humanity. In this sense, it is possible to say in hindsight that the German *Medienwissenschaft* of the 1980s and 1990s was successful because it not only made new objects productive with new perspectives but allowed the blind spots of other disciplines—namely, their media-technical conditions—to be taken into account. To cite just a handful of exemplary monographs from Kittler’s academic network: Siegfried Zielinski has stressed the importance of the video recorder for film studies, Bernhard Siegert has described the role of the postal service in the constitution of literature, Bernhard Dotzler has outlined how the computer has revolutionized writing, Peter Berz has discussed the role of standardization in the twentieth century, Stefan Rieger has investigated the influence of anthropometry on the field of anthropology, Cornelia Vismann has elucidated the significance of files in the history of law, and Markus Krajewski has even analyzed the ways in which index cards (and the boxes containing them) influenced the development of systems theory.<sup>4</sup>

In Kittler’s wake, German *Medienwissenschaft* has long derived the originality of its approach by constantly changing its levels of description, by provoking other disciplines, and by shifting the perspective from the message to the medium. This strength, however, contains within it an inherent weakness: first, because it places its potential independence in a state of dependency on other fields; second, because one tends to make enemies when employing such a strategy. The latter issue is disadvantageous even if, as in Kittler’s case, the enemies might be desired. The fact that this method is not always welcomed with open arms is demonstrated in an exemplary manner by the eleven evaluations of Kittler’s thesis. As some of the earliest reactions to Kittler’s approach, they are efforts at self-assurance, testaments to transgressional thinking, and engagements in trench warfare—all wrapped into one.

### **The *Habilitation***

One of the peculiarities of the German university system is that the path to a professorship requires an additional step after a doctoral degree has been earned: namely, the *Habilitation*, which is the highest academic qualification. The corresponding postdoctoral thesis or *Habilitationsschrift*, which should not be confused with a “second book,” is not submitted to

an advisor or supervisor but usually to a given faculty in which the post-doctoral scholar or *Habilitand* would like to be accepted. The governing body in charge of this process is thus always a university faculty consisting of several institutes. With the help of several evaluations or reviews, it examines whether the *Habilitand* can be integrated into the faculty, whether his or her research profile is sufficient, and whether he or she is a capable teacher. One does not become a professor, however, simply by completing a *Habilitation*. Rather, one must be offered a professorship, which in most cases—aside from junior professorships and special nonacademic qualifications—requires a *Habilitation*.

The task of the evaluators is to judge whether the candidate's thesis has done justice to the tradition, methodology, and scientific rigor of the discipline in question and whether the candidate, as a representative of his or her science, may be allowed to join the faculty—that is, whether he or she should be allowed to become a member of an exclusive club. The likeness of this process to an initiation rite explains the extremely tense character of the preface, which was written with this one end in mind. The text was intended to facilitate a self-contradictory process—one that makes sense only within its specific institutional setting—of facilitating the acceptance into a corpus of a study whose goal was to break the boundaries of the corpus itself. Kittler had to run through the gauntlet of institutional procedures and prove himself to be a suitable representative of a discipline whose self-image his own book vehemently opposed. Such was the scenario out of which his preface arose, and its tension is detectable in every line.

We can only speculate about whether this situation was especially burdensome to Kittler, who was thirty-nine years old at its beginning. The mills of German bureaucracy always grind slowly, yet such an initiation is itself, though conducted in the most intellectual of environments, a process that affects the body of the person undertaking it. Whoever belongs to a discipline must be disciplined. Even if Kittler, who worked as a visiting professor at Stanford from the fall of 1982 to the summer of 1983, could only observe the proceedings from a distance, he would have analyzed, as an avid reader of Foucault, all the steps in detail without ever being able to change the fact that all of the procedures were being directed toward his own body. And he would have been fully aware of the irony of this process, just as it must have tormented him—keen as he was not to endanger its outcome—to remain close-lipped about this very awareness.

### **The Evaluations**

The evaluations that were necessary for Kittler to complete the final institutional initiation rite of German academia were themselves as extensive

as a small book and were nearly published as such in the 1990s. They present, in any case, a brutally honest assessment and do nothing to hide the great effort that each of the reviewers had expended in writing them—even if it must be admitted that the group was made up entirely of men who write about women. Despite all of their criticism and their various scientific and political aims, they demonstrate a great deal of respect for the scholar under evaluation. As quickly becomes clear from reading them, each of the reviewers was acutely aware of the challenging and promising nature of the piece of scholarship before them.

At least at first, the usual practice was followed of appointing three reviewers from among the members of the committee. With well-intended criticism, the Germanists Gerhard Neumann and Gerhard Kaiser, who not only had supervised Kittler's doctoral dissertation but had also employed him as a scientific assistant (*wissenschaftlicher Assistent*) since 1976, understood Kittler's provocations, despite the unease caused by their brute presentation, as a challenge to be reckoned with. Yet these evaluations were followed by a negative appraisal by the Romance philologist Hans-Martin Gauger. The study, he wrote, "principally fails to live up to the scientific discourse. What we have here is, in part, an extra-scientific, and to a large extent an irrational discourse."<sup>5</sup> Because of the reviewers' lack of unanimity, the committee was unable to reach a compromise, and thus additional reviewers were called upon.

The thesis was sent to five more scholars within the discipline, four of whom judged it positively, and to three more scholars outside of the discipline, one of whom supported it while the other two expressed reservations. In the end, however, all but one of the committee members voted to accept the work. Gauger maintained his dissenting opinion and refused to recommend it to the faculty. He feared that the acceptance of Kittler's work might even jeopardize the future standing of German literary studies: "I am afraid that, in recognizing this work, we would set a precedent with wide-reaching implications."<sup>6</sup> The committee's report, which acknowledged all of the criticism but stressed the need for such "disruptive work," summarized the situation as follows: "There are no abstaining voices regarding the matter of whether this work is sufficient to satisfy the requirements of a *Habilitation*. At issue is rather a fundamental decision about the validity of an atypical piece of scholarship."<sup>7</sup>

The list of criticism that was produced throughout this process is strikingly long and contains perhaps everything that could possibly be brought forth against a *Habilitationsschrift*. The work was criticized for its lack of historical accuracy, for ignoring continuities and discontinuities alike, for its tendency to make nonchalant suggestions, for its "arbitrariness," as well as for its "manically idiosyncratic associations" and its

“acommunicative” and “peculiarly autistic line of thinking.”<sup>8</sup> It was accused of being “fashionable” and of being an unjustifiably selective history with “drastic distortions.”<sup>9</sup> “It is not that the dominant patterns of thought are conveniently brushed aside; they are not given any consideration at all.”<sup>10</sup> According to his own doctoral supervisor, Kittler’s understanding of science was “pessimistic in a way that is almost too shocking to mention.”<sup>11</sup> The blind spots of Kittler’s work are exposed on every page of the negative evaluations, according to which it was motivated by “a certain desire to provoke and by the smug confidence of a know-it-all” and represented an “expression of pure arrogance,” its author being “unwilling to participate in the scholarly discussion.”<sup>12</sup> Gauger attacked not only Kittler’s knowledge but, above all, his means—indeed, his entire strategy. Problematic, in his view, were Kittler’s “refusal to legitimate his own approach,” his “refusal to explain its guiding concepts,” and the text’s “suspension in a sort of poetry,” which led to “stylistic frivolity” and represented a “gesture of metaphysical arrogance.”<sup>13</sup> The smell was still lingering in the air from the 1980 publication of Kittler’s edited volume *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften* (The expulsion of spirit from the humanities), which incidentally included a contribution by Gerhard Kaiser.<sup>14</sup> Also still lingering was a fear of the “esoterism of Lacan’s and Foucault’s disciples.”<sup>15</sup>

Linguistically, too, Kittler’s work was out of the ordinary, yet he understood language itself as an object and not merely as an instrument. That the work could be read as poetry suggests perhaps that this distinction is more meaningful than it might seem. The Germanist Wolfram Mauser associated the text’s linguistic extravagance with the content of the work itself: “This *Habilitation* process seems to be an effort to carry out a scientific endeavor in terms of Wittgenstein’s language game. In my opinion, however, the thesis at hand does not actualize a language game of ‘science’ but rather a language game of ‘Kittler.’”<sup>16</sup> In order to characterize the fundamental problem of the work, Mauser adopted Kittler’s style of writing and attempted to undermine its effects by turning Kittler’s consciously unmetaphorical technical terminology into a metaphor:

The wirings undertaken by the author do not simply extend the interconnected network but rather switch AC and DC currents as well as circuits of unequal current strength. In all of this, one wonders why a short circuit never enters the discussion. Might this be because there is possibly no current flowing at all? Because it has been lost in all of the (alleged) feedback and control loops?<sup>17</sup>

For his part, Kaiser anticipated a term that would later be adopted by Kittler and others and stressed the significance of “cultural-technical

control loops,” whose metaphors of “ensoulment [*Beseelung*]” could prove useful in a variety of applications. In his preface, Kittler responded bluntly to these debates: “Technical vocabulary is well suited to transfer philosophical theories into historical facts.”<sup>18</sup>

In sum: “My objection is that this work does not attempt to prove anything rationally by means of observation and argumentation; it is rather simply putting on a show.”<sup>19</sup>

In sum (again): “Often I felt like a sophisticated man of the world scared stiff at a séance or spiritual ritual where a wise and inspired man was communicating his insights and illuminations in a language that swings back and forth among poetic cadences, bold aphorisms, and concepts of the highest complexity.”<sup>20</sup>

In sum (yet again):

From one section to the next I was troubled by the contradiction between historical evidence and Kittler’s representation of it. For me this is not a productive contradiction but rather an irritating one, because page after page I could not shake the impression that his conclusions were derived from an unacceptably biased assessment of texts.<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of literary hermeneutics, the verdict approximated a death sentence: “It is an example of eisegesis instead of exegesis.”<sup>22</sup> Hermeneutics, as Kittler demonstrated, “is a part and a product of the delusional system that it purports to have as its object.”<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, this perspective affected the self-conception of the hermeneutic readings of the evaluations. On the other hand, as Kaiser pointed out, it brought the book dangerously close to being a performative self-contradiction. Underlying the difficulties of classifying and evaluating Kittler’s work was its unyieldingly transgressive nature, which threatened to invalidate the standards with which such academic evaluations customarily operated: “Not every study provokes questions that, once answered, expand the horizons of the person asking them.”<sup>24</sup>

From Kittler’s perspective, to dismiss the negative reviews as the defensive tactics of an obsolete tradition would have been easy enough. Yet many of the critical observations (not all of which can be touched upon here) are based on good arguments, are persuasively presented, and are generally valid. They can therefore still be read today to shed light on the weaker points of Kittler’s study—seldom has a text been read so intensively by one reviewer, let alone eleven. Even the positive reviews express their share of doubts. Kittler’s preface, moreover, does nothing to fill in the historical gaps of his representation; it is simply a reaction to the readers’ methodological and theoretical objections. Whoever

would like to see a collection of historical details that contradict Kittler's assumptions will have to turn to the thorough evaluations themselves. And yet it has to be asked whether the promise of Kittler's work is undermined by such errors and inaccurate details. Given the magnitude of the project and the amount of effort it required, would overlooking such missteps not be better? Then again, perhaps his approach simply went against everything that a literary-theoretical *Habilitation* was supposed to accomplish in the year 1980. Is it even concerned with literary studies or the science of literature (*Literaturwissenschaft*)? Does it have anything to do with science at all? Beyond being a collection of academic rhetoric and counterrhetoric, and beyond presenting sound and less-than-sound arguments, the evaluations are worth reading because of their engagement with fundamental questions about what literary studies is meant to achieve and what its place is in the present—all the way to the observation that the collective of involved scholars will “itself be evaluated according to the achievements of the *Habilitation* that it has acknowledged.”<sup>25</sup> These are the issues that motivated the reviewers. They were forced to engage with the standards of scientific work and to articulate the presuppositions that, in certain uncritical cases, had remained unexpressed. In Kaiser's words,

Seldom in a *Habilitationsschrift* are the institution of the university and its representatives, who then have to carry through with the *Habilitation* process, treated with as much derision as they are in Kittler's. I am of the opinion that he has subjected the university and its science to such a stir in order to guarantee that they do not become complacent.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the evaluations also contain a great deal of praise. The philosopher Rainer Martin lauded the positivistic gesture of its “historical-inductive method.”<sup>27</sup> Its representation of the “‘legibility’ of cultural paradigms in the fundamental techniques of reproduction” was, according to Neumann, “breathtakingly accurate,” and the book has made “a high-quality contribution to *Medienwissenschaft*.”<sup>28</sup> This formulation, however, underscores the untimeliness of Kittler's book, for in 1982 there was hardly a *Medienwissenschaft* in Germany that dealt with such things—especially not a *Medienwissenschaft* that concentrated on anything beyond film, radio, and television. The self-applicability of the argument is also a running theme in the evaluations: “The text presents a sort of recording system that, yet again, somewhat formally thematizes the problem at hand.”<sup>29</sup> All in all, the book “calls into question the possibility of cognition itself” and has provided us with “provocative ideas that cannot be ignored in any future study of literature . . . that does not

simply want to take literature's tradition in the humanities as a right that it has earned for itself and that will forever protect it from inconvenient or discomforting learning processes."<sup>30</sup>

In a scorching but thoroughly polemical response, the Germanist Manfred Schneider, who had recently left Freiburg for a new position in Bochum, dismembered Gauger's objections with fifty bullet points.

If Mr. Kittler's *Habilitationsschrift* represents an affront to the habitual and orderly nature of scientific discourse, then the evaluation written by my colleague Gauger in defense of this order must be regarded outright as a parody of that which it is attempting to salvage. It must be regarded as a parody, that is, of rational engagement.<sup>31</sup>

Schneider was less concerned with evaluating Kittler's work than with evaluating Gauger's evaluation, which he dismissed as thoroughly as the latter had dismissed Kittler. By this point the evaluations had taken on a life of their own.

To oppose Gauger's critique that Kittler's work lacks any claims to truth, Schneider cited the approaches of Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, which in 1983 were still quite novel in German-speaking academia. The issue, Schneider thought, was not the standard of truth but the validity of discourses.

Kittler is not simulating any pursuit of truth by highlighting the inconsequential shadow-boxing of today's literary debate; he is rather dispensing with such appearances by placing full trust in the evidence presented in his analysis. Evidence is not truth but rather a persuasive effect that is dependent upon the conventions of a given discourse.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the evaluations thus represent an important component of the engagement of West German literary studies with poststructuralism. Kittler submitted his study at a time—not to mention at a place—in which the struggles over the status of the humanities, prompted by intellectual imports from France, were in full swing. The theoretical approaches of hermeneutics, linguistics, the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and deconstruction were all standing in opposition to one another. In its final report, the committee thus made a statement about its own involvement in the affair:

A committee, on which most of the members—reflecting the situation of the humanities in Germany—are representatives of the hermeneutic outlook toward science, must necessarily face extreme difficulties in reaching a final decision about a work that regards hermeneutics not as an explanatory process but rather a counterpart to poetry.<sup>33</sup>

Earlier in Freiburg, in 1977, a similar response had been prompted by Klaus Theweleit's dissertation *Männerphantasien*, later translated as *Male Fantasies*.<sup>34</sup> In a later interview, Kittler accordingly made some comments about the Francophobia of the reviewers: "One of the three reviewers, whom I had sought out later, found me to be a nice person in conversation but thought they had an obligation to reject my *Habilitation* for fear that it might give rise to another Michel Foucault."<sup>35</sup> With the utmost clarity, the evaluations attest to a dramatic transformation taking place in the humanities, of which Kittler's work was clearly one of the symptoms. It would be welcome if, today, the profound questions of our disciplines and the controversial aspects of our work were more frequently addressed with such acuity and intensity, though above all in a public format.

### The Preface

One of the critical points raised by the evaluations concerns the lack of an introduction. Kittler's preface should be regarded as an effort to make up for this deficiency: as an effort, that is, to clarify the broader framework of the study, to position it within the field of research, to explicate its aims and methods, and to situate it in the present. Not without reason, Frank's evaluation refers to Kittler's preface as "an elegantly written *discours de la méthode* and an impressive methodological synthesis"—although not all of the evaluators agreed with Frank's understanding of Kittler's methods.<sup>36</sup>

The preface served to frame the way the book was read and to control its reception. Not only does it contain additional information about the text (and, implicitly, about the author), but it also legitimizes the method employed. Its absence from the first version of the text can also be understood as a lack of second-order self-observation—as a failure of Kittler to read and clarify himself. Composed on an "electric IBM 72 typewriter with three exchangeable type balls in the Courier font (normal, bold, and italics)," the text begins appropriately with an explanation of the word *Aufschreibesysteme* (recording systems), which Kittler adopted from the German version of Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* and whose absence from everything but the title of the thesis obviously did not sit well with the evaluators.<sup>37</sup> In what follows, he goes on to express his debts to Foucault and Jacques Derrida but also to point out how he has gone beyond discourse analysis and grammatology—namely, by stressing "technological thresholds" and the "material basis of information."<sup>38</sup> He also—though without citing specific sources—refers to contemporary debates, calling specific attention to pragmatolinguistics, ethnomethodology, and to the influences of authors such as Heinrich Bosse, Umberto Eco, Jürgen Habermas, Anton Kaes, Julia Kristeva, Helmut

Schanze, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Walter Ong, and Samuel Weber.

Moritz Hiller, who had access to the archival material from Kittler's estate, has shown that the preface exists in two versions: one that Kittler had begun to write in early 1983 during his term at Stanford and that he subsequently submitted in the summer of the same year; and another that was revised in 1987, presumably to accompany the second edition of the book. While this revised version never made it into the second edition, it did serve as the basis of the afterword to the English translation of that book, which appeared in 1990.<sup>39</sup> The later version, which has been translated for this volume, differs from its predecessor in two ways. On the first page, the original title has been pasted over with a piece of paper containing the following unattributed text: "A device cannot un-distinguish [*un-unterscheiden*] a pseudo-random sequence from a genuine random sequence if the period length is greater than its storage capacity. This condition is usually easy to fulfill." As Hiller has shown, this quotation derives from a textbook on semiconductor switching technology that appears in the book's bibliography.<sup>40</sup> Second, the 1987 version contains, appended at the end, a page and a half of additional explanations that begin with a quotation from Bertolt Brecht about love. On the one hand, these additions—drawing from thoughts expressed in his 1986 work *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*—deepen the book's relation to information theory by drawing a connection between the data processing of technical media and processed sensualities: "Ultimately, to analyze literature as an information technology means to recognize its sensualities."<sup>41</sup> Information technology, in other words, is thus directed toward the body. On the other hand, accordingly, the added sentences specify the gender problematics of the book, something that deserves an essay of its own.

Both versions, but especially that from 1987, do justice to Kittler's altered theoretical position. They demonstrate, as Hiller has argued, a transition in Kittler's work toward the information-theoretical pervasiveness of data processing and can thus serve as foils to contrast with the book itself. By means of a few added lines, the later version of the preface places a stronger emphasis on Claude Shannon's approach, of which Kittler, who was first introduced to Shannon's work during his stay at Stanford, had in fact been unaware while writing the *Habilitationsschrift*. Shannon's ideas were integrated into the earlier preface from 1983, but by 1987 Kittler was treating the implementation of information theory as a sort of programmatic motto. Here Kittler underscores that his main concern is with the channels through which literature is mediated. He calls into question the fundamental presuppositions from which the givenness of literary texts had been derived by himself deriving them from the "information channel known as writing." This is the "elementary level"

upon which literary history ought to be written as a “history of practices.”<sup>42</sup> The prefaces can thus be regarded as the earliest evidence of Kittler’s adoption of information-theoretical and mathematical methods, methods that would be instrumental in his theoretical shift toward the computer. At the same time they expose the fact that the first version of *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* was written entirely in the absence of such influence.

The preface also does much to define, with greater precision, the theoretical applicability of the work. Often mentioning Marshall McLuhan, it carries out a similar shift in perspective from the message to the medium and, much like the work of the Canadian literary critic, associates them with the thesis that technology is an extension of man. Literature, according to Kittler, is an “extension or replacement of the central nervous system.” Unlike McLuhan’s, however, Kittler’s orientation is based on information theory. Texts are interrogated “as they exist, not with what they contain or represent, reflect or criticize.”<sup>43</sup> This perspective, which focuses on what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer would later call the “materiality of communication,” can already be said to resemble that of machines: “Books, to put it bluntly, are masses of printed words.”<sup>44</sup> This new perspective is consistently pursued in Kittler’s application of information theory, which should neither formalize nor idealize anything but instead be applied to “concrete instantiations in time and space.”<sup>45</sup> Thus at the end of the preface, as though anticipating his future work and intellectual agenda, we encounter the triad of *storage*, *transmission*, and *processing*, which Kittler introduces as a methodological tool and as a descriptive language for the technical world.

Even though it was written not long after the book itself, the preface casts a recapitulating glance over the work. This glance comes from another order and obeys the perspective of information theory. One could say that, in this text, Kittler is reading Kittler and reconfiguring the approach of the book according to this new perspective. The two standpoints are able to come together without much friction because information theory is capable of analyzing the data processing of recording systems. Yet the differences between these two perspectives are important to underscore. This is important, first, in order to retrace the plausibilities that Kittler’s works have given rise to at various points in time, for they have not remained the same. The potential of Kittler’s work to provoke, in other words, has always been changing.<sup>46</sup> The provocations of information theory and Kittler’s antihumanism, for instance, are hardly mentioned in the evaluations. Second, the overlapping, palimpsest-like nature of these two theoretical orientations makes clear that Kittler’s thinking cannot be understood as a monolithic block and should not be

reduced to a mere handful of quotable remarks. Kittler has no theory—and perhaps in this sense there is also no such thing as “German media theory”—because he avails himself of neither a fixed set of intellectual instruments nor an unchanging orientation. Rather, each of his books and articles makes itself available to such orientations. Kittler is a perspectivist in the Nietzschean sense. The danger of translating any of his work lies in replacing this multiplicity of insights, which is so manifest in the preface’s synthesis of two perspectives, with a rigid theoretical construct.

### **Historicizing Kittler**

In order to do any justice to the variability of perspectives in Kittler’s work—in order, that is, to classify his different views and orientations and to comprehend their differences—historicization is helpful, and historicizing Kittler’s work has been made easier today on account of the availability of the archival material. To historicize Kittler, as Claus Pias writes, “is to reconstruct the preconditions that enabled Kittler to be so theoretically provocative—the preconditions that enabled the phenomenon of ‘Kittler’ and that are now to be found elsewhere.”<sup>47</sup> The influence that Kittler’s work has exerted, according to Pias, feeds off its flair for provocation, for finding weak points in the architectures of knowledge, and for pulling the rug out from under established positions: techno-determinism, antihumanism, and militarism—but also smoking, drinking, and Martin Heidegger—are among these provocations. In Kittler’s case, they are not exclusively self-serving but often enough they function epistemologically and strategically by operating in the fissures of traditional theories. The effects of Kittler’s flair for such things are clear to see in all of the ambivalence, irritation, and even despair and anger expressed by the evaluators. For two long years, no one quite knew what to do with this book, and this is because it provoked or frustrated the process itself.

The publication of this and other texts from Kittler’s estate—such as his last lecture, forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*—should also serve as an occasion to discuss the contexts in which his work was able to gain plausibility and to examine the author himself as a circuit between various discourses. The preface gives us a glimpse of “Kittler in action,” of how he managed to connect discourses with one another.<sup>48</sup> At the very least, such a perspective should enable us to understand whom Kittler’s book was capable of provoking, as well as when and where these provocations took place. Yet beyond this history, the question remains open concerning the preconditions that today’s media-theoretical provocations might need in order to have a similar effect. In all of the debates over Kittler’s legacy, that is, it has also become clear that Kittler is part of the past and

is thus incapable of providing answers to many of the questions presently facing us. To name just one example, the computers described by him are not connected, and thus the exclusion of the social from his work necessarily fails to do justice to the irreversible entanglement of technology and sociality in today's networked media. Following Pias's suggestion, one could perhaps formulate the question of Kittler's present significance as follows: Do his alleged technodeterminism and antihumanism continue to provoke? If so, whom do they provoke and why?

In the context of a translation, the provocative potential of this text differs somewhat from what it might be in other theoretical and institutional contexts, where it might likewise produce novel ripple effects. On the one hand, this perhaps does something to explain the intensity with which Kittler is currently being received in North America, given that his provocations—regarding the end of the human, of humanism, or at least of the humanities—have found fresh territory on that side of the Atlantic. However, “German media theory,” as Geoffrey Winthrop-Young has repeatedly stressed, is a North American label for an import, and it by no means encompasses everything that is associated with *Medienwissenschaft* in Germany.<sup>49</sup> The label is not unambiguous, and neither is the line that it draws between Germany and the rest of the world. Perhaps, as it seems, German media theory is an American product, and perhaps its provocations are thus American provocations. Like every translation, that of the text presented here not only allows for similarities to be compared; it also allows differences to emerge. As long as we remain unaware of such differences, the effects of translated texts will remain ahistorical.

If, in this preface, Kittler can thus be said to be reading Kittler, then this activity has an inherently interpretive dimension, one that oscillates between self-hermeneutics and paranoia—paranoia driven not least by the many eyes evaluating his book at the time, looking at him askance, and posing questions that his text is forced to answer. The sovereignty with which Kittler affirmed his often contradictory variety of perspectives while simultaneously preserving a voice of his own should, regardless of whatever objections we might have to the content of his work, remain as provocative as ever.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of Kittler's text, in German, was published in 2012. See Friedrich A. Kittler, "AUFSCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900: Vorwort," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 117–26.
2. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 54–55; originally published as *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (Munich: Fink, 1985).
3. Ute Holl and Claus Pias, "Editorische Vorbemerkung," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 114–15.
4. Siegfried Zielinski, *Zur Geschichte des Videorecorders* (Berlin: Spiess, 1986); Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), originally published as *Relais: Geschichte der Literatur als Epoche der Post* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1993); Bernhard J. Dotzler, *Papiermaschinen: Versuch über Communication und Control in Literatur und Technik* (Berlin: Akademie, 1996); Peter Berz, *08/15: Ein Standard des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Fink, 2001); Stefan Rieger, *Die Individualität der Medien: Eine Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001); Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), originally published as *Akten: Medientechnik und Recht* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2000); and Markus Krajewski, *Zettelwirtschaft: Die Geburt der Kartei aus dem Geiste der Bibliothek* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2002).
5. Hans-Martin Gauger, "Gutachten zur Arbeit Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900 von Herrn Dr. F. A. Kittler," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 137.
6. Hans-Martin Gauger, "Stellungnahme (Sondervotum) zur Arbeit von F. A. Kittler Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 188.
7. Manfred Frank, "Auswärtsgutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Friedrich A. Kittler Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 167; and "Kommissions-Gutachten zu Friedrich A. Kittlers Habilitationsschrift Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 184.
8. Gauger, "Gutachten," 137–43.
9. Gauger, "Gutachten," 143; Gottfried Schramm, "Gutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Friedrich A. Kittler Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 155; and Wolfram Mauser, "Gutachten über die Habilitationsschrift von Friedrich A. Kittler Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 172.
10. Gauger, "Gutachten," 137.
11. Gerhard Kaiser, "Gutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Herrn Dr. Friedrich A. Kittler Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 130.
12. Mauser, "Gutachten," 176; and Gauger, "Stellungnahme," 186.
13. Gauger, "Gutachten," 139; and Gerhard Neumann, "Gutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Herrn Dr. Friedrich A. Kittler: Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 36.
14. Friedrich A. Kittler, ed., *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften: Programme des Poststrukturalismus* (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh, 1980).
15. Kaiser "Gutachten," 132.
16. Mauser, "Gutachten," 179.
17. Mauser, "Gutachten," 175.

18. Friedrich A. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*," in this issue of *Grey Room*; and Kittler, "AUFSCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 121.
19. Gauger, "Stellungnahme," 185.
20. Schramm, "Gutachten," 156.
21. Mauser, "Gutachten," 175.
22. Schramm, "Gutachten," 155.
23. Kaiser, "Gutachten," 131.
24. Frank, "Auswärtsgutachten," 168.
25. Schramm, "Gutachten," 153.
26. Kaiser, "Gutachten," 132.
27. Rainer Marten, "Gutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Friedrich A. Kittler Aufscreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 160.
28. Neumann, "Gutachten," 134–36.
29. Neumann, "Gutachten," 136.
30. Mauser, "Gutachten," 179; and Frank, "Auswärtsgutachten," 166.
31. Manfred Schneider, "Gutachten zur Habilitationsschrift von Herrn Dr. F. A. Kittler Aufscreibesysteme 1800/1900," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 145.
32. Schneider, "Gutachten," 152.
33. "Kommissions-Gutachten," 183. In an essay on these evaluations, Claudia Liebrand underscores the paranoid style of Kittler's work: "[F]rom a minimal number of references, and with a highly economical degree of argumentation," she notes, "it deduces the maximum amount of significant consequences." Claudia Liebrand, "Strong Readings, Paranoia und Kittlers Habilitationsverfahren: Prolegomena einer Fallstudie," in *Interpretieren nach den 'turns': Literaturtheoretische Revisionen*, ed. Claudia Liebrand and Rainer J. Kaus (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 224. As Liebrand shows, paranoia is at the same time an elementary aspect of the interpretive process associated with hermeneutics. Accordingly, this entanglement is one of the basic motifs of Kittler's work that has made reading the book so difficult; namely, because the method and object of knowledge frequently overlap.
34. Klaus Theweleit, *Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichte*, vol. 1 of *Männerphantasien* (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1977); and Klaus Theweleit, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, vol. 1 of *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
35. Friedrich Kittler and Christoph Weinberger, "Das kalte Modell von Struktur: Interview," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 1 (2009): 95.
36. Frank, "Auswärtsgutachten," 165.
37. Manfred Schneider, "Postscriptum," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 190–91.
38. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 121.
39. Moritz Hiller, "Unter Aufscreibesystemen: 'Eine Adresse im Adressbuch IC der Kultur,'" *Metaphora* 1 (2015): 1–26. According to Hiller the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach contains two manuscripts: version TS 1, which was written in the United States toward the beginning of 1983 and survives only as a fragment; and version TS 2, which was submitted in July 1983 in Freiburg after Kittler had returned from Stanford. The latter version, which was published in the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* from a copy preserved in Gauger's private estate, was revised yet again by Kittler in 1987. At that time

he covered over the title with strips of paper and added three pages of text. Hiller, who reconstructed this textual history with his philological acumen, kindly shared his findings with me, for which I owe him my thanks.

40. Hiller, "Unter Aufschreibesystemen," 16. See Ulrich Tietze and Christoph Schenk, *Halbleiter-Schaltungstechnik* (Berlin: Springer, 1976), 510.

41. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 121.

42. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 117.

43. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 117.

44. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 117. See also Hans U. Gumbrecht and Karl L. Pfeiffer, eds., *Materialities of Communication*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); originally published as *Materialität der Kommunikation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988).

45. Kittler, "Unpublished Preface to *Discourse Networks*"; and Kittler, "AUF-SCHREIBESYSTEME 1800/1900," 117.

46. Claus Pias, "Friedrich Kittler und der 'Mißbrauch von Heeresgerät': Zur Situation eines Denkbildes 1964—1984—2014," *Merkur* 69 (2015): 35.

47. Pias, "Friedrich Kittler und der 'Mißbrauch von Heeresgerät,'" 35.

48. I owe this turn of phrase and several other inspirations to Bernard D. Geoghegan.

49. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).

