

# Friedrich Kittler and the Reception of French Post-Structuralist Thinking in Germany

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## Abstract

Considered one of the most prominent German media theorists, Friedrich Adolf Kittler, even though he personally contests this description, reveals himself as one of the most promising contemporary philosophers of German thought about the media, with wide acceptance in the United States and Europe. This article seeks to recover aspects that are still not very widespread about his biography and thinking in Brazil and presents it from the historical perspective of the reception of the ideas of the so-called French theory in Germany, or post-structuralism, whose matrix faced all kinds of resistance in German universities, and surpassed, in part, by the strength of will of this German intellectual.

**Keywords:** Kittler • German theory • Media • Post-structuralism • Communication

## Introduction

### Friedrich Adolf Kittler and his Legacy of Thought on Media

Martin Heidegger once summed up Aristotle's career in a memorable and economical way: *he was born, worked and died*. The importance of the Greek philosopher has certainly always been in what he thought, whatever he did beside it, how he lived and how he got involved in the politics of Athens, for example [1]. There are thinkers who mark their biographies in the same way, much more for what they revealed in their thinking than for political activism or engagements as organic intellectuals. The German media philosophy theorist Friedrich Adolf Kittler is one of them.

Born in 1943 in the small town of Rochlitz, Germany, Kittler came to the position of professor of aesthetics at the prestigious Humboldt Universität, specialized in literary and philosophical studies, after passing his "*Habilitation*" exam in Switzerland with the work on the nineteenth-century writer Conrad Ferdinand Mayer - This exam has formally qualified a candidate for a professor at German-speaking universities.

In more than 30 years of academic life, he has written and edited more than two dozen books and more than a hundred papers. To paraphrase Heidegger - about Aristotle, Kittler was born, worked and *continued working*. At first glance, this is the stereotype of someone like him, who spent his life among libraries and reading rooms. The war left an indelible impression and Mark on his childhood. But at the age of seven, Kittler was already reciting passages from Goethe thanks, in part, to the effort of his father, a teacher who had been without his students during those Nazi years and who was trying to devote his time to homeschooling for his children. Their parents' concern about education was so huge that they moved from East to West Germany due to the war and to make sure their children could study regularly at universities.

Young Kittler grew up surrounded by abstract socialist rhetoric and spent more than a quarter of a century at the University of Freiburg, in a cultural environment

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to confront German intellectual orthodoxy- inherited from the conservatism of the Third Reich. The British media art critic and professor John Armitage (2006) outlined that we are produced by our schools, universities and our readings. In an interview given by Kittler to Armitage, the gratitude shown to parents for the opportunity to study and get appropriate education at a university in West Germany at a time when this would be practically impossible in the East of the country was visibly extracted. [2]

In a certain way, the association that should be made between Kittler's writings, which were not few, and all his experience, especially in the 1960s in Germany, amid the *Achtundsechziger* generation, the generation of 68 (the 68ers) whose performance in France, a country bordering the German city of Freiburg, would certainly have left a mark on the minds of young Germans. However, it must be said that Kittler was never politically active. He had neither clear and decisive engagement with parties or movements, nor did he seem particularly interested in expanding, so to speak, any political awareness.

What one reads from his writings is that he cultivated the reading of German philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, who certainly were not among exactly politically correct authors in 1968, like we would say in today's expression. In the meantime, Kittler also demonstrated his experienced of reading texts by Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, which, in a way, would confirm this contagion of frontiers of thought between France and Germany of that period, as said earlier. What we do know is that Kittler was part of the exponents of the German reception concerning French post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism is a current of thought and philosophical movement that developed due to the expansion of structuralist ideas of the 50s and 60s in France, in resistance to Phenomenology, a philosophical school that was highly popular. Among Germans, post-structuralist thinking was far more difficult in terms of reception than, for example, when this philosophy reached intellectuals in the United States.

Kittler began to be read in the United States mainly by the hands of Robert Holub, one of the first to present his ideas to an Anglophone audience. It was his German translations of Derrida's works that really brought German academic intellectualism closer to the philosophical current of post-structuralism in the field of human and social sciences. Previous attempts with Lacan would have left the Germans even more confused and had not helped in receiving these ideas in that university culture.

The area of Social Communication or the field of research in Communication Theories in Brazil and, indeed, in Latin America - have still done almost nothing in terms of harnessing the thought of the strength of an intellectual like Kittler, except for one or more few students, or even the interested efforts of postgraduate research professors who try to be close to German theories.

Fortunately, this reality is already close changing gradually, despite the growing discursive formation that advocates that studies in Brazil shift the focus of Eurocentric culture. It is no less true that it can also be better read and used, if the perspectives in authors and traditions are broadened beyond the orthodox study of some canons, which, it must be said, always deserve to be continuously studied, if only for the time possible to see their own ideas renewed, then because of the historical legacy they offer to the state-of-the-art studies in Social Communication as in several areas.

In the United States, in turn, the reception of post-structuralist studies of the so-called French theory was discussed – mainly - with Cusset (2008) and Lotringer and Cohen (2011), but this is the theme for another paper. In this work, we must contribute to an initial approach by Kittler to new researchers, especially Brazilians, and an understanding of his role a mediator in the unfriendly process of receiving this awareness in Germany. We know that some poststructuralist authors like Derrida, Lacan and Foucault were exceptionally well-received by the American university elite, above all – by academic institutions such as John Hopkins University, the University of Berkeley and Cornell, for example. In Yale, a school was created with this movement - known as “Yale Deconstructionist School” (Yale School of Deconstruction).

For decades, New Criticism had been a dominant theoretical school in North American academia, mainly via literary theories, until then intellectuals came across Derrida's ideas and his clear messages, such as that Literature would be responsible for function of transmitting values of a time (a clarity of thought and expression that was not always possible for the Germans, in Lacan, for example). Deconstructionism would make contextual social analyzes that brought a sense of belonging of the North American and French intellectuals to radical activities and left-wing narratives while many of the ideas of New Criticism were revealed to be intentional and affective fallacies, precisely because they did not take into account the context and dwell only on the surface structures of its intended objects of analysis.

At the same time that Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes, Lacan and others transformed intellectual life in the United States, largely through lectures, German Literature researchers, known as 'Germanists', met, as they did in Munich, in opposition to decades of profound schooling of a conservative and predilectionally apolitical thought, undoubtedly a reflection of the years of Nazism, and with its methodologies such as *Close Textual Reading* marked by New Criticism.

The German break with this tradition came with a historical load, and also with breaking all the inheritances left by Nazism: after the Second World War, many Germanists republished papers from 1930 to 1940, surprisingly replacing nouns and adjectives, and changing the terms by more acceptable ones. More than an intellectual obsolescence, what was known to be happening it was a burial of ideas that still insisted on resisting the way of thinking and marked by the use of language. Examples of such substitutions were words like 'race', replaced by 'nation'; 'popular', which came to mean 'national'; or 'ethnic' and 'tribes', for terms that directly identified the geographic region and even for the use of the word 'tradition', for example. The word 'blood', generally used by German conservative thinkers with a semantic for 'ethnic', virtually disappeared in these rewritings. Post-structuralism, mainly for reasons like these, had much more difficulties for acceptance it in Germany than in the United States. To make matters worse, German critics said that the so-called French theory was actually somewhat German: “it was a rather German affair” [3].

For a German theorist, the idea at the time was that without Edmund Husserl (without Phenomenology, which Structuralism sought to deny), without Freud, Nietzsche, and, of course, without Heidegger, without structuralists, post-structuralists like Derrida and Lacan, it would be simply unthinkable. The tribute of the thought of the French school to the German school would thus be formalized, and therefore, apparently, at least in the ego of the intellectualism of the most conservative intellectuals in German universities, would prove that the so-called post-structuralism or such French theory was not so genuine and not even original. It was much more a rancid than a truth. But, in fact, questions in Germany about the effective validity of this new concept were not weak.

One of the main questions in university classes in Germany (*Vorlesungen*),

which often brought together more than 200 students in the same auditorium, came in the direction of trying to find out what, after all, was what the Germans still preferred to call 'neo-structuralism'. Kittler was well positioned outside this war of arguments against the intellectual orthodoxy of the time. For him, it was a fact that post-structuralism and so-called media studies had achieved academic relevance. Ironically, when he admitted this in the 1990s, it was precisely the time that coincided with his departure from this thinking and his concern with media studies [1].

According to Kittler (2000), Heidegger was rarely mentioned in the works published before the 1990s, partly because of the relationship that the philosopher maintained in proximity to the Third Reich, although he did not clearly support Nazism -As the German philosopher and historian always made clear, Hannah Arendt, with whom she had a loving relationship, was an absolute defender of individual freedoms and a radical critic of Hitler's policy.

There were German intellectuals who retired shortly after the opening of the borders between the two parts of Germany with the fall of the Berlin Wall and who avoided revealing their approach to Heidegger, who were still marked by the fear left so many years later and since the years ps war. Kittler (2000) revealed that those who had any proximity to the III Reich at the university, were often unable to obtain their PhD, even though they had made brilliant defenses, which generally reinforces the idea that the German academic environment continuously supported the lucid criticism against the horrors brought by Nazism. Although Heidegger had supported Hitler's democratically coming to power and supported the Third Reich, being soon later horrified by the practices of genocide, there were many who preferred to be silent yet having unchanged positions, as Martin Heidegger seems to have been.

In a certain way, according to the categorical German intellectuals, the French post-structuralists resumed Heidegger without naming him, either so as not to formally recognize the state of debtors who are in his thinking and thereby claiming a hegemony of French thought, or because they wanted the ideas to be read with the inevitable connection with Nazism that Heidegger's name still seemed to be associated.

For many German critics, the young Kittler [1] Foucault and Lacan are reduced to Heideggerian francophone clones as they brought ideas that the German philosopher was already ruminating on. So, as said it, there would not be exactly a real innovation in the ideas of those French people.

This years around 1968 seemed to bring a revolution more in The Beatles and in the philosophy of sex, drugs and rock and roll than in scientific or academic works, many of them being supposedly neutral due to a policy subordinated to the psychedelic culture. A questioning continued to grow among the Germans, despite this cold distance from French ideas, which was the need to be against any vestige of fascism and distant from the authoritarianism of the 1950s and cultural conservatism dragged on from previous decades.

Kittler has emerged as a German leader among media theorists, now as one of the most influential proponents of post-structuralism. Perhaps, it is really the convergence of these two labels. It is clear, however, that he did not first awaken as a media theorist, considering the initial works that dealt with literary texts much more than with 'new' technologies. He never referred to himself as a media theorist, even though he used the terms 'medium' and 'media' relatively frequently in almost two decades of his work.

Kittler's theory is not a German theory just because he writes in German or because he was born in Germany, or because he frequently quotes German canons like Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche and others. He quotes the French too and writes in French however, he is not a French theorist. Thus, Withroup-Young (2011) explains that

“ He has produced a German theory because the deeper layers of his work, the bias of his arguments and the recurrence of a certain set of references and associations, not to mention the way in which he expresses them, have to be understood against the background of debates on technology, humanism, and individual, as well as collective identity formation that emerged in the German-speaking countries over the course of the last two centuries”.(p.2)

Kittler had directly been working on media and technologies for at least two

decades, after an initial period devoted to more archaeological studies in relation to literary texts. His works dealt with non-centrist media, such as the mechanization of writing, or cinematography and phonography, for example. Undoubtedly, his works in this field were the most widely disseminated and translated, increasing his recognition and labeling as a media theorist, despite his peremptory denial of this formal identification. From the study and analysis of techniques and means of communication, he then extended to more musical and mathematical understandings of the systems on which cultures are based, converging media knowledge with computing and elementary physics, alongside the study of mental skills such as reading and writing. Obviously, a division in this way is not exactly fair with the facts of specific life because the elements are never separated in a static way in successive stages. What is identified is a slight predominance of a concern over others in their intellectual production, especially because Kittler never stopped writing about literary texts and did not abandon his concern with the media.

With regard to his reflections on the media, Kittler took Gutenberg's object as nothing less than the entire Western history of Ancient Greece, recognizing categories that he nominally classified and wanted to think of them as ruptures and continuities. It is essential that students with an interest in media theory keep this in mind to understand the intellectual concerns by Kittler. Much of what Kittler would say about media is already there, when he developed his discourse analysis of literary texts and would reappear when he took into account the unique cultural issues of Ancient Greece. It may not be one of the most complex authors, but he has proved to be one of the most controversial. Difficult to read and even more to translate it, it is still unfeasible to discuss him without having in mind the objections that accuse him of obscurantism, anti-humanism or techno-determinism and having some sort of fetish with everything that refers to German militarism [1].

It is certainly still under strong demand to investigate what exactly is original, idealistic, critical, or whatever Kittler defends, a fact that can encourage us to understand his thinking and his relevance to studies in theories of communication. What may seem to many of his critics and contestants the contradictory character of their ideas and even a certain aspiration to deconstruct the perception of things, it is likely to serve to situate as a post-structuralist influence and find resonance with the labels of this philosophical movement and his thinking.

When he problematizes, for example, the three Ws (the war, the woman and style of writing) and shows himself controversial in his exhibitions, or when he makes diverse provocations and generalizations, for example, Kittler only reinforces this brand and makes us think of his image as an intellectual in the context of a post-war Germany who is facing all the challenges of our 21st Century.

What we know about him is that because he imported the so-called post-structuralist theory (which in theory had nothing), whether inspired by Heidegger or not and bringing it into media studies, Kittler has been instrumental in removing a pattern from debate around technology. His so-called anti-humanism, for example, may become one of the most important contributions to reflection around questions about the co-evolution of men and machines.

John Peters, one of the youngest American media theorists, said the following of Kittler:

"In the end, what I like best about Kittler in his sheer love of intelligence and its commitment to delirious delight as a path to higher wisdom. Like all of us, Friedrich Kittler can be blind, but like very few of us, he can also be absolutely dazzling" [4].

In what has been called media archeology, Kittler seems to have a somewhat founding role. His concern is thus described by Marcio Telles (2017), when he presents the perspective of the studies of this German theorist in the form of his object, which are the technologies themselves and not exactly the speeches or narratives that circulate in the media.

"The search is not only for historical descendants, but also occurs in terms of computational infrastructures, their circuits and transistors, since the media

is the very condition of knowledge (Kittler, 1999) of a given time, and also of perception, sensation, memory, experience, and time (Parikka, 2012). That is why the object of media archeology, at least Kittlerian, is not people, discourses and narratives, but media technology itself, always approached through its "concrete artifacts, design solutions and varied technological layers ranging from hardware to software processes, [because] each one in its own way acts in the circulation of time and memory.

Telles is one of these young Brazilian researchers who has managed to disseminate the thought of German theorists in our country with works that describe in detail some main structures of Kittler's work, supported in large part by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka among others promising researchers of this thematic approach named as 'archeology' of the media.

In *Media Archaeology*, Huhtamo and Parikka (2011, p.2) claim that the seeds of this understanding are found in Walter Benjamin as well as Marshall McLuhan and more recently, with the ruptures in relation to New Criticism. They point to a range of studies that would be in the convergence with the same tradition via this media archeology and cite, for example, theories of cultural materialism, discourse analysis, gender theories and decolonial studies, among many others. Unhappy with the canonized narratives of media culture and history, these approaches come to join forces in a common interest for new perspectives of study.

For media critic Geert Lovink (2004), media archeology is a hermeneutical reading of the 'new' against the residues of the past rather than talking about the histories of technologies from the past to the present.

"Media archaeologists have challenged the rejection of history by modern media culture and theory alike by pointing out hitherto unnoticed continuities and ruptures. As a consequence, the area for media studies has been pushed back by centuries and extended beyond the Western world" (Lovink, 2004, p.11)

McLuhan's ideas of new media as extensions of man and his potential strength for promoting social change have influenced the German materialist school of media mainly through the work of Friedrich Kittler. According to Huhtamo and Parikka (2011), the Michel Foucault's work also had a strong impact on media archeology. In his *Archeology of Knowledge*, the foundations of an excavation are described as a method, which, given the limited extent of this article, we cannot develop. What is important to say is that German theorists were progressively welcoming less deterministic matrices of thought and the ones brought by the Anglo-Saxons. For Kittler, inspired by the possibilities of these new approaches, it was possible to interpret discourses differently, linking them to the understanding of techno-historical events: "Discourse analysis ignores the fact that the factual condition is no simple methodological example but is in its case a Techno-historical event" [5-7].

The young Kittler had transferred his work to the University of Bochum where Foucault had definitely found greater acceptance of the German academic intellectuals and whose acceptance would favor Kittler to develop the ideas of this French *ecole* without as much resistance as it was still in almost all institutions of Germany. This journey was very decisive to understand what he had to say in order to become recognized.

What was seen, according to Cusset (2008) and Lotringer and Cohen (2001), is that in those years the attacks of German scholars on French theory were very strong and aggressive, making French thought in the country increasingly impenetrable, quite differently to what happened in the United States. The Germans seemed to cultivate an almost blind obsession with attacking everything that came from France with neo-structuralist significance.

It must be borne in mind that many of the German intellectuals who were at the head of university chairs had in fact formed under the influence of the Third Reich and had a certain commitment to Nazism. Kittler's biography is, in a way, traversed throughout that period of German history and was associated with life in the war, with all the disappointments that it brought and that intoxicated the dominant thought in Germany for a long time. But Kittler's intellectual work emerged precisely from the traumas of Stalingrad in 1968 and then the reunification of two Germanies with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Its

potential is much greater than the circumstances of its history.

In 1979, Kittler published a reading he made of "Wanderer's Night song", entitled "Lullaby in Birdland" (Kittler belongs to a selected group of German academics who had a special predilection for titles in English in those years, especially with reference to technology and popular culture). In re-reading of Goethe's poem, Kittler made it clear that analyzes previously known in the literary medium ignored the discursive preconditions that enabled the poem to produce effects. Kittler was more concerned with questions about the order of speech and the strategic mechanisms and rituals that led the poem to produce certain effects in some sense on readers, which was a clear influence of Foucault on his work.

Kittler was less interested in what the poem was saying than in unveiling such mechanisms, which primarily would be responsible for producing meanings far more than any other attempt at meaning or hermeneutic. This was definitely not a very common concern among literati and linguists.

Kittler managed to identify an almost Freudian sense in the poem because when he first asked himself about the voices of the discourse, wanting to know first of all in his analysis who speaks through the poem, he revealed the perception of a mother's voice. There is a synchronous cutout that makes this reading even more significantly symbolic. In the second half of the 18th century, youth and adult education underwent significant changes. The emergence of the bourgeois family nucleus that almost completely reduced women to private life and the role of caregiver showed signs of exhaustion. Breaking with the practices that were common in the families of the Middle Ages and Modernity, mothers were no longer in charge of leading their children to the conditions of sufficiently autonomous and psychically prepared individuals for adult life.

Kittler strove to demonstrate how cultural rules, norms, codes and disruptions affect readers. How this works is what he tried to demonstrate in *Discourse Networks* (1990), when he detailed the educational references of the 18th century and the language transformations in teaching practices in his analysis.

The argument that texts are signified by their discursive circumstances reinforced the sense that the medium is the message, which was the central thesis in Marshall McLuhan and brought Friedrich Kittler back to the field of Communication studies.

Telles (2017), supported by Parikka (2012) emphasized again that Kittler can be considered the father of media archeology, under the argument, that each discursive network is understood as a regime of sensation and possibility of action. He also adds: "It can be said that Kittler tried to cross Foucault's archeology of the conditions of knowledge with the McLuhan interest in how the media shapes our sensory and cognitive skills" [8].

Martins and Bertol (2018), regarding Kittler, initially summarize the German theorist's contribution to the post-structuralist movement:

"By making an original appropriation of different authors that can be classified as post-structuralist - especially Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan - Kittler develops a descriptive methodology for the history of the media by assuming that the processing, registration and transmission of information depend on specific devices, especially with the appearance of "technical media" at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century" (p.11)

In *The History of the Media*, Friedrich Kittler (2005), with translation by Luis Carlos Borges and the recognized support and mentioned review of Winfried Nöth, it is proposed a scientific history of the media, promoting a review of the various technological artifacts which the human began to deal with. In his view, it needs to be re-signified by a kind of archeology of the means. The work is part of a reduced collection of sources available in Portuguese in Brazil, containing Kittler's authorial writing.

Felinto and Müller (2019), in the preface to a recent work in which they act as technical reviewers, mention that Kittler, like Flusser, interprets the media "as a result of a scientific and technological process that moves further away and more of the human (at least a certain idea of humanity)" (p.9). They rescue the criticism brought by Kittler and found in other German media theorists such as Zielinski, Weibel and others, of the dependence that we have in relation to the devices and images in all our activities. It is a relevant work, one of the rare translations in Brazil by Kittler, in particular, for dwelling on his most widespread work worldwide: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. As we can see, less than a year has passed since this publication, which reinforces the recent nature of the translation of Kittler's thought in our country and the need for a greater integration of his works among Brazilian researchers.

In the introduction, they bring to the relevant work of the German theorist, commenting that Kittler makes an inversion of what is proposed by McLuhan regarding the media as extensions of our body when he says that "our bodies become extensions of the media", and then point out that this work brings together qualities to be "the entry point for the Brazilian reader in Kittler's thinking" (p.15).

Winkler (2010) developed a set of reflections by several contemporary German researchers and research on their techniques that integrate the media, in an interdisciplinary perspective. He actually organized them in a book, the process of which they ended up calling "*Automatismus*", recognizing the tribute to the thought of Kittler as one of the most expressive media theorists in that country. Winkler's work continued reflections published in a book in 2008, *Basiswissen Medien*, in which he proposed to think about the technique, the symbolic character, the form and content of the media, of various issues of sign and time, coding and other topics, in line with Friedrich Kittler's questions and beyond. They are just two of the contemporary reference works, which, although they do not yet have translations into Portuguese or English maybe future interests for Brazilian researchers who are preoccupied with these themes.

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