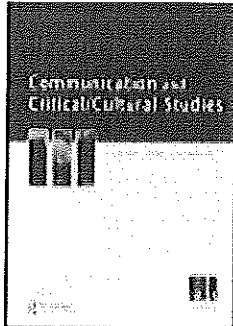


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# “Epistemology Not Ideology OR Why We Need New Germans”

Jeremy Packer

*This article argues for a shift away from ideology critique as the primary focus of critical communication and media studies. Instead, the author suggests enlisting the work of German Media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s Foucault-inspired approach to the epistemological dimensions of media. This focus is relevant to digital media in terms of the selection, storage, and processing of data that are the fundamental concerns of Kittler’s media studies. Advertising and drone warfare are used as examples of how this approach differs from ideological critique.*

*Keywords: Friedrich Kittler; ideology; digital media; Michel Foucault; media studies; epistemology*

Italians have been all the rage in critical/cultural scholarship for some time now. In fact they have been the “new French” for almost a decade. And before the full-scale postmodern/post-structural onslaught of those French, there was of course Gramsci, Cultural Studies’ first Italian romance. Before Gramsci, critical/cultural scholars had a long engagement with Germans from Frankfurt whose “school” is to this day well represented in critical/cultural scholarship, textbooks, and graduate-level primers. This school provided important means for engaging with the interrelationship between media, technology, the market, and culture. For some it made media studies a legitimate field of critical enquiry. However, Frankfurt continues to provide a too easy fix for critical/cultural studies’ addiction to ideology critique. In the age of digital media (a multi-decade reality by this point) a cure for this nagging fixation is a necessity. This is because digital media power is first and foremost epistemological, not ideological. It is computational. It predicts, collects, assesses, guides, directs, processes, opens, shuts, invades, experiments, and expands every data-producing moment we are networked OR un-networked—absence of data is itself meaningful

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data. Working in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, Friedrich Kittler added media to Foucault's archeological mix to concoct a cold-turkey cure for hermeneutic and ideological fixation.<sup>1</sup> His version of media studies focuses upon the brute facticity that (1) media determine our situation and (2) some statements exist while others do not. Understood as questions, how do media (orality, print, electronic, digital) differently determine the brute facticity of what data are selected, stored, and processed? By extension, how do they make possible new forms of knowledge, new epistemologies? Ultimately, Kittler claimed, communication yearns to be digital, as this will resolve its eternal problematic—the reduction of noise. In simple terms, ones and zeros can't be mistaken for one another. For communication theory, the digital and the ideological are fundamentally in opposition to each other. Ideology adds noise into the system in order to obfuscate and mask the truth. The teleology of the digital is to reduce all noise and allow the truth of the universe to speak itself.

Kittler's work has reconfigured the entire field of media studies in Germany<sup>2</sup> and has been circulating in English for more than two decades, most prominently in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1985/1992) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986/1999). Yet, he has been curiously absent from discussions in most US communication departments, cursorily cited in a grand total of two articles during the first decade of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*' existence, while there is one fleeting mention of Kittler in the full collection of National Communication Association's other critical journal, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Elsewhere, Kittler's work has produced widespread interest amongst digital media scholars writing in English, especially those coming out of the fields of English, Literature, and German. The top-ranked international journal of Cultural Studies, *Theory Culture and Society*, devoted a special issue to his work in 2006,<sup>3</sup> while following his death in 2011 a number of other journals have followed suit.<sup>4</sup> The two most prominent scholars in North America to write extensively on Kittler, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and John Durham Peters,<sup>5</sup> both provide numerous reasons why Kittler's approach to media has not taken off in English-language scholarship, not the least of which is his dismissal of cultural studies for its fixation on media content as opposed to technology and the meaning produced by audiences. Yet both Peters and Winthrop-Young are convinced his work has pushed media studies in a more radical direction than any other scholar writing in the past three decades. I simply want to suggest that the critical analysis of communication and media might benefit from Kittler's key concepts—create a greater "Kittler Effect" as Winthrop-Young describes it.<sup>6</sup> In particular, we need to take digital media's materiality seriously insofar as it reconfigures power/knowledge relationships via the production of truth. This is to say, we need to amplify Kittler's Foucauldianism and extend it into the realm of political struggle.

Ideology critique has been a hallmark of critical and cultural scholarship for decades. In some respects it has been foundational to Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, queer, and race related work in the fields of communication, cultural studies, media studies, as well as work in the humanities and social sciences more broadly. However, scholars of varying nationalities, political stripes, and theoretical commitments have over the past several decades called for new forms of critical and cultural analysis that

moves beyond the text/audience relationship toward something else. The work of Michel Foucault has been the grounding for a few of these maneuvers. The most widely known variant of this work in North America first arose in Britain and Australia during the 1990s and is broadly encompassed by the term governmentality. Here we see a critical analysis turned upon culture as mechanisms or technologies of government—such as museums, the YMCA, or reality television.<sup>7</sup> The shift is both away from the state per se and away from the battles said to be waged between the ears. This is a move away from the subject of ideology toward processes of subjectification. One political strategy that arose from such an understanding was to engage directly with cultural institutions understood as arenas of subject formation and knowledge production. Institutions such as museums weren't merely ideological state apparatuses, but sites through which more equitable, democratic, and progressive power relationships might be forged. While this work has been especially useful for understanding how culture and power operate in ways external to textuality and discursivity, it hasn't tended to the data collection, storing, and processing functions of media as Kittler understands them.

Understanding media not merely as transmitters—the old “mass media” function—but rather as data collectors, storage houses, and processing centers, reorients critical attention toward the epistemological power of media. Media power is not merely something that is wielded like a wand whose mystifying effects can be directed through nefarious use—though this may still sometimes be the case. Media power is founded upon the ability to capture, measure, and experiment with reality. Media forge real power/knowledge relationships that reassemble the world. The breakthrough of digital media, as Kittler rightly pointed out, is that all media—all of reality—is now translatable. The world is being turned into digital data and thus transformable via digital manipulation. This is the realm of media's greatest power. Media are constantly reformulating dataflow pathways, forms of interactions, and interface arrangements—human to human, human to media, media to media, media to machines, humans to machines, machines to nature, etc. Let's look at two simple and illustrative examples, advertising and drones—the spheres of the market and the military—where we can see how digital media power works in the epistemological dimension to reconfigure reality.

For decades now, leftist critique of the advertising industry in general and specific advertisements have focused upon advertising's ideological function writ large—the rationalization of consumption—and advertisements immediate role in objectification, fetishisation, and other forms of misrepresentation. Both broad-based and specific goals have been said to be accomplished through various forms of mystification, obfuscation, or “magic” (as Raymond Williams described it<sup>8</sup>). In other words, ideology was working on people to make them buy things they didn't need, shouldn't want, or couldn't afford—including capitalism itself. It made them believe that buying things would make them happy. Media studies' critical role was in pointing out how this continued to work through the manipulation of various sign systems.

One of the difficult problems for both critical scholars and the advertising industry itself was in proving that advertisements actually accomplished what both groups claimed. This problem, at least from the perspective of industry, is disappearing. Due

to the “big data” model pioneered and widely implemented by google,<sup>9</sup> the logic of computation is coming to dominate. In this model, the only thing that matters are directly measurable results. The outcomes of all data prompts (whether advertisements, emails, gmail suggestions, search results, etc.) are collected, stored, and processed in order to more finely tune their value (in attributing a cost for ads on google) and more importantly to fine-tune their affectivity. Now it could be suggested that these processes still depend upon ideology. However, I would counter by saying that the content of the ads per se is of no consequence in its singularity. It is merely one of an infinite number of variations whose form, velocity, and reach are malleable. More importantly, Google’s computations are not content-oriented in the manner that advertising agencies or critical scholars are. Rather, the effect is the content. The only thing that matters are effects—did someone initiate financial data flows, spend time, consume, click, or conform? Further, the only measurable quantity is digital data. Google doesn’t and couldn’t measure ideology. My point is that critical focus upon content misses the fundamental shift in this new orientation. The computational turn in advertising recognizes that with enough data, the control of human behavior can be worked upon piece by piece through constantly refining Kittler’s key media processes—collecting, storing, and processing data. No grand plans, aesthetic visions, or obfuscation is necessary.

A second arena of ideological critique works to draw out how relations of power are configured in such a way as to determine which differences matter and to reproduce inequities and reproduce power relations across such differences—class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. Media studies’ role has been to explain how (mass) media have been used to make such inequities seem natural or commonsensical—hence the definition of ideology as the production of common sense. One grand function of ideology in this tradition has been the propaganda work done to legitimate the use of state violence to carry out warfare and class warfare. While the various wars humans are engaged in at the moment are certainly justified by all sorts of propaganda campaigns and ideological maneuverings, one key tenant of warfare specifically, and political subjectivity more generally, is being reworked by digital media. As drone technologies are increasingly asked to make decisions on their own, the line drawn between friend and enemy is being taken over by media. Not only are drones, as one in a long history of earth-observing military media,<sup>10</sup> collecting data across a wide swath of potential warzones, but their very existence in any place produces a warzone. Moreover, it means that drones can make the fundamental determination of political affiliation, friend or foe.<sup>11</sup>

Kittler often stated, and has equally been criticized for, his so-called “war thesis”: (1) war operates as both explanation and illustration of technological change in Kittler’s media theory.<sup>12</sup> Kittler more explicitly suggests that “Command in war has to be digital precisely because war itself is noisy”—commands must get through, and they must be unmistakable.<sup>13</sup> Fire and hold your fire can’t be confused. Of course they often are, but during a time of Mutually Assured Destruction, the necessity for absolute certainty was hardwired into the digital detection system built for anti-nuclear response. Cuban missiles and cryptic Soviet responses necessitated full-time

everywhere Hot Lines that simplified the chain of command to two nodes with only two meaningful messages—"we have fired" and "we have not fired"—presence and absence, light and dark, one and zero. The age of real-time global digital media was born. However, in the post-Soviet era of Empire, where the whole earth is a battlefield, and every human is a potential terrorist, new forms of earth observation media<sup>14</sup> and new military media are necessitated. Drones are the experimental forefront of both observation and response. They not only collect the data but are increasingly being given the task of processing the data. Finally, the chain of command that led from deciding who was the enemy (the political decision), to locating the enemy (the observational process), to executing the enemy (the soldiering process) is becoming a single digitally determined procedure. It is not simply that drones can locate real pre-existent enemies more accurately; rather they can collect and process the necessary data to determine algorithmically the threat potential of any given situation/subject and act accordingly. The long-term picture is not one of ideologically convincing a citizenry to support war efforts and provide soldiers. Rather, it is allowing the comingled digital and military teleologies to be carried to their logical conclusion. Threat assessment will be turned over to machines that automatically and instantaneously produce truth ("you are an enemy") and enact a sovereign power relationship ("you have been executed").

Let us just suppose for a moment that Kittler's "War Thesis" has some merit. As critical media scholars, we might need to think like military generals and always be prepared for the worst. From such a perspective, drones are simply the next-wave media where the distinction between media as a metaphorical weapon and a real tool for killing no longer exists. More to the point, media/weapon is not merely a tool, but a self-directed combatant whose chain of command is a networked swarm of other drones. You don't need to support the military use of drones to be a Cylon apologist. Using iTunes Genius or google.maps may be just as useful to media when they decide humans are the real enemies. If the ten-step strategy outlined below does not get through, you should assume Microsoft Word has chosen sides and disrupted this transmission.

- Step One: Consider the full repercussions of the fact that media think.
- Step Two: Turn off all

## Notes

- [1] For a discussion of Kittler and German Media Studies' rejection of Frankfurt style ideology critique, see Eva Horn "Editor's Introduction: 'There is No Media,'" from the special issue of *Grey Room* 29 (2008): pp. 6–13, devoted to German Media Studies.
- [2] *Ibid* and *New German Critique*, No. 78 (1999) devoted to German Media Studies.
- [3] *Theory Culture and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 7–8.
- [4] See *Cultural Politics* 8, issue 3 (2012), *Thesis Eleven* 107: 1 (2011).
- [5] See Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and Media Studies*, Polity (2011), John Durham Peter's "Introduction: Friedrich Kittler's Light Shows," in Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media*, Polity (2010), pp. 1–17, and John Durham Peters, "Strange Sympathies: Horizons of German and American Media Theory," *American Studies as Media Studies*, ed. Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), 3–23.
- [6] *Kittler and Media Studies*, pp. 143–46.

- [7] For instance, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and *Culture a Reformer's Science*, New York: Routledge (1998), Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV* (New York: Blackwell, 2008), and Ronald Greene, "Y Movies: Film and the Modernization of Pastoral Power," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, issue 1 (2005): 20–36.
- [8] "Advertising: The Magic System," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 170–95.
- [9] See Ken Auletta, *Googled: The End of the World as We Know It* (New York: Random House, 2009).
- [10] See Jeremy Packer (2013) "Screens in the Sky: SAGE, surveillance, and the automation of perceptual, mnemonic, and epistemological labor," *Social Semiotics*, 23, issue 2.
- [11] Jeremy Packer and Josh Reeves (2013) "Romancing the Drone: Military Desire and Anthropophobia from SAGE to Swarm," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 38, No. 3.
- [12] Winthrop-Young, 129–43.
- [13] "Media Wars: Trenches, lighting, stars." In *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 1997), 117–29.
- [14] For an analysis of "earth observation media" see Chris Russill "Why haven't we seen the whole Earth observing system yet?" his introduction to the special issue he edited of *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 38, issue 3, devoted to the topic.