

Friedrich Kittler, *Musik und Mathematik*, Band I: Hellas, Teil 1: Aphrodite. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006). Hardbound, 409 pp., 12 color illustrations. EUR 39.90.

Friedrich Kittler has been the most influential (and controversial) Germanist scholar of the last twenty-odd years, largely in his extension of literary studies to that of electronic media technologies. His name is eponymous with a certain current of media theory in Germany, which, unlike older social-science models of "mass media theory," or the philologically based work of Walter J. Ong, is marked by grand speculative theoretical ambitions derived from French poststructuralism. After his magnum opus *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (1985; Engl. transl. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 1990), Kittler has extended his research on "gramophone, film, typewriter" (the title of another book from 1986) into computer technologies and mathematics. Unlike many dilettantish enthusiasts of the "digital," Kittler actually knows his math and programming, which gives his work a more precise focus than most media theories. At the same time, he has appeared increasingly to be trying on the venerable Hellenist's mantle that has had such a long career in Germany, from Winckelmann down through Nietzsche and Heidegger (cf. Kittler, *Vom Griechenland [Of Greece]*, 2001). This newfound Grecophilia has now produced *Musik und Mathematik*.

Eclectic references to music pepper his earlier work, from Wagner to rock, but with a few exceptions,¹ Kittler has not written on music as a separate topic until now. The reader's expectations are thus not small, for potential applications of media theory to music are enormous. Despite its title, though, Kittler's book does not get to music or mathematics until 200 pages into his book. What precedes this is concerned with mythology. The history of actual Greek music interests him little: there is only brief discussion of Greek scales, modes, or instruments (p. 239 f.); many standard historical works on Greek music are not in his bibliography. Kittler deliberately scorns mere empirical history; his version is rather a transposition of Heidegger's "history of Being" (*Seinsgeschichte*) into an idiosyncratic reading of Homer, the *Odyssey* in particular, and then Pythagoras. Music and mathematics are at the mythical origin of this reading. Nor is Homer read allegorically, as he was by Schelling and (following him) Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Here as elsewhere in his work, Adorno is Kittler's *bête noire*, the object of withering putdowns, and thus a jarring counterpoint to the rest of the book's frequent evocations of harmony and ecstatic presence. (A particularly bitter instance is on page 55—mercifully in the footnotes—where Adorno is accused of "lying," called "clueless," and his reading of Homer "shabby and banal.") Kittler's master Heidegger, who had equally little love for Adorno, preferred to pass over his enemy in sublime silence; one wishes a bit of that old-fashioned decorum had been followed here. (Adorno might be consoled by the fact that Euripides, too, is dismissed here even more harshly than he was by the young Nietzsche.)

¹"Weltatem. Über Wagners Medientechnologie," in *Diskursanalysen*, ed Kittler, Manfred Schneider and Samuel Weber (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986), pp. 94-107; in English as "Weltatem. On Wagner's Media Technology", in: Leroy R. Shaw/Nancy R. Cirillo/Marion Miller eds., *Wagner in Retrospect. A Centennial Reappraisal* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1987), pp. 203-212. Relevant also to the present discussion is Kittler's essay on math, "Zahl und Ziffer," in Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, eds., *Bild Schrift Zahl* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), pp. 193-204.

Against this older exegetical tradition, Homer is taken as literal truth. (The old theories of multiple authorship of the Homeric canon are also now abandoned for a single author—and his mythico-ontological authority. Kittler's main witness for this idea is the Homer scholar Barry Powell.²) Thus the first part of Kittler's book consists, *mirabile dictu*, of a commented re-telling of the *Odyssey*. The comments are philological, and massively learned—almost too massively, one wonders, and often of questionable relevance to the main argument (if such indeed there be). The real point of this huge apparatus of learning is also to legitimate Kittler among the Hellenists and philologists, for he knows himself as eccentric to mainstream scholarship on Antiquity as was Nietzsche. (Reviews of the book in Germany, some of which were written by historians, did not hesitate to take up Kittler's challenge.) True to his Heideggerian bent, Kittler is inordinately fond of etymology, and many footnotes delve at length into word-roots, as if the latter contained the history of what they named *in nuce*. More problematic is the Heideggerizing language itself, including such neologisms as the verbs *wesen*, *anwesen* and *abwesen* (not otherwise in use in current German practice), instead of the usual *sein* (to be), *anwesend* or *abwesend sein* (be present or absent); "re-vealing" (*entbergen*), the pathos-laden use of *fragen* (to ask, as in "to ask after Being"). Such portentous terms jostle strangely with some of Kittler's other habits, such as references to his beloved 1960s rock lyrics from Pink Floyd or The Doors, or a painfully bad pun on the goddess Kalypso and Harry Belafonte. (At one point [p. 151], *Entbergen* is reduced to Nausikaa's stripping off her clothes: Heidegger for hippies, perhaps?) Moreover, he has apparently provided his own translations of Homer himself, certainly no mean feat. The odd thing is that these translations are written in a Stefan-George-like Art-Nouveau German with no capital letters and no normal punctuation (instead, George's own invented sign "•"). Within these translations, otherwise redolent of turn-of-the-century decadent preciousness, Kittler does not hesitate to use chatty turns of phrase from quite contemporary German, beginning Homeric lines with the word *Los* (in English: "get a move on" or "get going").

Kittler's cavalier attitude to mere empirical history gets a great deal of material simply wrong. An instance: on page 26, after the theory of music's origin in accompanying repetitive work has been dismissed, a footnote informs us that "Church Fathers think of music in just such a base and busy way: see John Chrysostom in Strunk, 1998." One comment in Chrysostom is implicitly made to represent *all* Church Fathers (who, according to Kittler's scheme, must be decadent relative to the primeval *fons et origo* that was Hellas). The considerable amount of work done on the central importance of music to St. Augustine (see H.-I. Marrou) and the effect this had in the elevated place of music in the Western medieval *quadrivium* is simply bypassed. Perhaps the next volume of Kittler's project (on the Middle Ages) will correct this? Similarly, it is claimed on page 141 that "Romans, Christians, Puritans"—who all have one thing in common, namely that they were not Greek—"hid nothing" so much as the fact that "music and dance could ground morals and even states." But Horace's canonical *Ode* I:X (*Mercuri, facunde nepos Atlantis*, imitated from Alcaeus) tells a variant of just this genesis of culture, albeit with a Roman shift of accent to sport and barter.³ Christians, too, had St.

²*Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³In W. G. Shepherd's translation: "Atlas' trenchant grandson, Mercury,/Whose wit first civilized new-made man/with the gift of speech and cult of/ the wrestling-floor" (*Horace: The Complete Odes and Epodes*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983, p. 78)

Cecilia as patron saint not only of music, but of "heav'nly harmony" (Dryden) in its larger, cosmic sense. Cultural history in Kittler's version has to be written in shorthand. Nowhere does he resemble his antagonist Adorno more than in such one-sidedness.

To add to this, philological and historical evidence sits alongside topical current references, whether to Julian Jaynes' "origins of the bicameral mind" (1976) or less convincingly, to recent political events (the first Gulf War on page 63, or Arab petrodollars on page 61). Strangest of all is that, interspersed with the re-telling of the *Odyssey*, we are given home-movie, diaristic reminiscences of Kittler's own personal pilgrimage to the Homeric sites—with what appear to be private asides to a lover (or, alternately, direct personal address to the goddess Aphrodite).

Finally, it may seem ironic that a critic who had earlier scandalized Germanists by titling a book *The Expulsion of the Spirit from the Humanities* (1980; the German contains a pun on *Geisteswissenschaften*, "sciences of the spirit"), and by insisting that the real driving force behind German literature was not thought, but technological media, now turns back with a vengeance to the most fundamentalizing tradition in German humanities, namely Hellenism. Although Kittler does not simply repeat the Germanic mythologies of predecessors like Heidegger,⁴ his Greek turn is very clearly meant as a self-pronouncedly "European" reaction against Anglo-American cultural studies, for whose Left political agendas he has nothing but contempt. As once with Stravinsky's neoclassicism, the last scandal of the erstwhile bad boy is to become a convert to tradition. This conversion seems to be quite literal, for Kittler writes about Greek gods in the present tense, as if he believed in their actual existence. "Muses are thus no simile, no mere fable; their word continues on today, if we so much as name Sirens or Agamemnon" (p. 95). True belief is the condition not only of having written this monumental piece of *Schwärmerei*, but also of understanding it.⁵ Thus, even more than the neo-Hellenic Nietzsche, Kittler sweepingly dismisses not only the substance of Christian belief, but even its historical contribution: "Christianity has almost nothing to do with science and high culture" (p. 218). Pascal, Kepler, and Newton might raise an eyebrow here. Freud, by contrast, was willing to grant religion at least historical if not material truth. This is not history, but a creed.

All this is part and parcel of a familiar strategy of provocation with which Kittler has made his name as *terrible simplificateur*; again, Nietzsche's unorthodox reading of the Dionysian would be the obvious precursor. Yet there is a great difference between the desperately lonely, shy philosopher of Sils-Maria, living in pensions on a modest income and only fully recognized after his death, and someone whose position is as secure as Kittler's. With a professorship at the Humboldt University in Berlin, research assistants to help him, and an established reputation, Kittler can indulge in whatever fancies he wishes and publish them, as indeed he has. The major difference between Nietzsche and Kittler would have to be concinnity: although Kittler can turn a witty epigram, his more than 300-page sprawl has little in common with Nietzsche's classical terseness. Similarly, though one might compare Kittler's historico-philosophical fantasy to Robert Graves' mythopoetic *The White Goddess* (1948), which also replaced conventional scholarly

⁴On this, see Claudia Breger, "Gods, German Scholars, and the Gift of Greece. Friedrich Kittler's Philhellenic Fantasies." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23 (Dec. 2006), pp. 111-134. Breger's critique of Kittler's cultural politics in *Vom Griechenland* could be applied here also, and thus need not be repeated.

⁵ So one scholar is dismissed on p. 102 (note 1) as "uselessly impious," *nutzlos unfrohm*.

methods with artistic imagination (and received similar critiques from academics), it is hard to imagine Kittler's bulky, massive tome ever appealing to a wider public, as has Graves.

Despite all these caveats, sufficient to relegate most books to oblivion, one should try to do justice to the argument of Kittler's book. Even in what may be a grandiose failure, he remains, as Wagner was for Nietzsche, an interesting "case." It may surprise Kittler's readers that the words *medium* or *media*, for which he has been best known, only appear a few times here (and once even slightly, p. 218). *Musik und Mathematik* is, in roundabout fashion, a search for origins; no archaeology in Foucault's sense, but a pursuit of the supposed origin of music. For Kittler, this is to be found in the *Odyssey's* Sirens, who are identical to the Muses as to nymphs (p. 54). Against Adorno and Horkheimer's Freudian allegory of the Sirens as natural drives mastered by Odysseus in order to attain rationality, Kittler reads them in Heideggerian manner, that is, as the tautology of Being itself. "Sirens sing, because they sing; roses bloom, because they bloom. Gifts without meaning or cause melt the ears softer than wax" (p. 50). It is not hard to hear an echo (!) of Heidegger's "What is Being? It is itself."⁶ Recursion also reminds Kittler of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence (pp. 98-100). Alternately, we could read the Sirens' onto-tautology as an anachronistic transposition backwards of information theory's idea of recursivity, or the recursive function theory of Kittler's hero Alan Turing. This would be supported by references elsewhere: "The art of listening to one's own speech introduces recursions: Muses and Sirens" (p. 91). The transcription of the Sirens' song in Homer requires the Greek alphabet, thus vowels in addition to consonants (in contradistinction to Hebrew [p. 58]). Here is Kittler's Birth of Music from the Spirit of Alphabetizing:

The birth of the Muses was that of vowels. For the Greek vowel alphabet, far from being merely a phonocentric whimsy of "metaphysics," remains, as the first complete analysis of a spoken language, the single and datable foundational event of our unique culture. It has not since ceased to be called up again in ever new recursions. (p. 127)

In this last quote, we can hear not only an echo of Lacan's "that which does not cease to write itself" (*Encore*, 1975), but also an explicit rejection of Derrida and deconstruction. This is in spite of the fact that the book's main idea is the novelty and cultural specificity of the Greeks' use of their new alphabet for mathematical purposes. Kittler has become not only a Hellenist, but can also sound at times like a Born-Again Logocentric. He is not alone in this; elsewhere in academe one can find a similar disaffection with decades of Derridean dominance, precisely among those who were once its most ardent defenders (such as Kittler's friend Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht at Stanford, who has recently turned to an "aesthetics of presence.") Having brought the world to disappearance in the hard, rational abstraction of math, Kittler wants now to return to a mythology of sensual appearance and experience: *les extrêmes se touchent*. Little wonder he is prone to ontologizing ideas of mythical unity. In the Gods, Knowledge and Being are one (p. 94). Through this union, Kittler redefines (p. 127) the ancient notion of mimesis itself (against Erich Auerbach and others). Not surprising, then, that Kittler

⁶"Was ist das Sein? Es ist es selbst," *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1968), p. 19.

surpasses even the megalomania of Freud, who famously claimed that the "mystery" of Oedipus had had to wait thousands of years before he himself could solve it. "Quod erat demonstrandum, after almost three wasted millennia" (p. 58).

The combination of music and mathematics, as pre-discursive foundation myth of ecstatic and erotic presence contained in the medium of the alphabet, links Kittler not only to Nietzsche's Dionysios, but also to earlier proto-anthropologists like Herder and Vico, with their theories of the mythic origins of language and culture. This is unsurprising, since Kittler has, not long ago, devoted an entire book to a "cultural history of cultural science."⁷ It does have the effect of making *Musik und Mathematik* rather diffuse, given that anything from sexual practices to naval technology can be lumped together as "culture." Like Vico and Herder, Kittler sees his culture through a very aesthetic lens. Again and again he rejects any sociological or functional explanations for the origins of music and math (pp. 213, 219): they are, like Being, there for nothing, thus art for art's sake. One suspects that *Musik und Mathematik* was, like the *Kulturgeschichte*, a series of university lectures, which would explain why so much well-known material (Sophocles, the colonies of Magna Graeca) is rehashed here: presumably for the benefit of German undergraduates. Kittler's entire project, of which this volume is meant to be only the beginning, has been conceived as a rival to Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, and its central idea of Being-captured-by-media is thus deliberately opposed to Foucault's more severe and traditionally "philosophical" view of an Antiquity ruled by a "care of the self." To Foucault's primacy of ethics, Kittler opposes that of the aesthetic. And one sees that even as a latter-day reborn Greek, Kittler has remained partly true to his basic impulse, which is radically to historicize philosophical concepts. Just as he once brought Lacan's ideal triad of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic down to the material history of gramophone, film and typewriter, he has here historicized Heidegger's Discovery of Being into the invention of math from the alphabet. Heidegger, who reproached the Occident with "forgetting of Being," is here taken to task for forgetting of Number (p. 214). Yet the invention of mathematics, in turn, derived from the Greek alphabet, becomes itself an Event (*Ereignis*) in the History of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*). Kittler is no ordinary historian. Nor is he a garden-variety Heideggerian. Although the authority of Heidegger is never questioned except as regards his ignorance of math, Kittler's conversion of Heidegger's "clearing of Being" into the invention of a technified alphabet—and the history of being into that of *techne*—is quite unorthodox, even if one keeps the later Heidegger's philosophy of technology (*Technik*) in mind. Might the unity of history and Being not lie in a word that Kittler—not by chance—almost never uses here, because it would entail a critical self-consciousness he wants to avoid: namely, myth?

Gradually, however, one may find oneself caught up in—and entertained by—Kittler's sprawling web of quotations, and realize that, against any normative "classicism," he has produced a book often unreadable as any Modernist novel. This contradicts his own offhand dismissal of Modernism in a footnote (p. 238) denigrating Joyce. As Joseph Frank wrote of *Ulysses*, *Musik und Mathematik* cannot be read, only reread. In Book Two of the *Confessions*, Augustine had a vegetal-mythic metaphor for his own youthfully promiscuous dissipation prior to conversion: *silvescere ausus sum variis et umbrosis amoribus*, or: 'I ran wild in various and shady love affairs.' The verb

⁷*Eine Kulturgeschichte der Kulturwissenschaft* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000).

silvescere, literally to "become forest," resonates with Augustine's commentary on Psalm 37.15, where Adam, having sinned, hides himself in the trees of Paradise. *Silva*, forest, was also used (by Macrobius, or Chalcidius's version of Plato) to translate Greek *hyle* or matter. Kittler's book is just such a passionate running wild into the matter of Greece, whether of erudition or of Eros; reading it, one is alternately seduced by and suspicious of this wildness. One can only admire his refusal to rest on his laurels and repeat himself, as he could easily have done.⁸ *Musik und Mathematik* is, among other things, an anarcho-romantic manifesto for freedom of interpretation, against canons of proper academic respectability (see pp. 112-115). Hellas cannot live unless it is, in Pound's famous phrase, "made new." If Kittler has achieved anything unquestionable here, he has made Greece strange for us again. To do so, he has, like a figure from Ovid, metamorphosed himself into an oddly late-modern, counter-cultural Greek.

Larson Powell

⁸See his criticisms of other media theorists in an interesting interview in *Telepolis* ("Rock Me, Aphrodite," online at <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/22/22695/1.html>).