Friedrich Kittler

Gramophone, Film, Typewriter

PREFACE

Tap my head and mike my brain,
Stick that needle in my vein.
Pynchon

Media determine our situation which--in spite or because of it--deserves a description. Situation conferences were held by the German General Staff, grand ones around noon and smaller ones in the evening: in front of sand tables and maps, in war and so-called peace. Until Dr Gottfried Benn, writer and senior army doctor, also charged literature and literary criticism with the task of recognizing the situation. His rationale (in a letter to a friend): "As you know, I sign: On behalf of the Chief of the Army High Command: Dr Benn."[1]

Indeed: in 1941, with the knowledge of files and technologies, enemy positions and deployment plans, and located at the center of the Army High Command in Berlin's Bendlerstraße, it may still have been possible to recognize the situation.[2]

The present situation is more obscure. For one, the pertinent files are kept in archives which will all remain classified for exactly as many years as there still is a difference between files and facts or planned objectives and their realization. Secondly, even secret files suffer a loss of power when real streams of data, bypassing writing and writers, turn out to be unreadable series of numbers circulating between networked computers. Technologies that not only subvert writing but also engulf it and carry it off together with so-called Man render their own description impossible. Increasingly, data flows once confined to books and later to records and films are disappearing into black holes and boxes which, as artificial intelligences, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands. In this situation we are left with reminiscences only, that is to say, with stories. How it came to pass what is written in no book, books may still be able to record. Pushed to their margins even obsolete media become sensitive enough to register the signs and clues of a situation. Then, as in the case of the sectional plane of two optical media, patterns and moirés emerge: myths, fictions of science, oracles...

This book is a story made up of such stories. It collects, comments and relays passages and texts that show how the novelty of technological media inscribed itself into the old paper of books. Many of these papers are old or maybe even forgotten; but in the founding age of technological media their terror was so overwhelming that literature registered it more acutely than in today's alleged media pluralism in which anything goes, provided it does not disturb the circuits of Silicon Valley assuming global dominance. An information technology, however, whose monopoly is now coming to an end, registers this very information: an aesthetics of terror. What writers astonished by gramophones, films, and typewriters--the first technological media--committed to paper between 1880 and 1920 amounts, therefore, to a ghostly image of our present as future.[3] Those early and seemingly harmless machines capable of storing and

therefore separating sounds, sights and writing, ushered in a technologizing of information which, in retrospect, paved the way for today's self-recursive stream of numbers.

Obviously, stories of this kind cannot replace a history of technology. Even if they were countless they would remain numberless and thus fail to capture the real upon which all innovations are based. Conversely, number series, blueprints, and diagrams never turn back into writing, only into machines.[4] Heidegger said as much with his fine statement that technology itself prevents any experience of its essence.[5] However, Heidegger's textbook-like confusion of writing and experience does not have to be; simple knowledge suffices, instead of philosophical inquiries into the essence of things.

We are able to provide the technological and historical data upon which fictional media texts, too, are based. Only then will the old and the new, books and their technological successors arrive as the information they are. *Understanding Media* remains--despite McLuhan's title--an impossibility precisely because the dominant information technologies of the day, in turn, control all understanding and its illusions. But blueprints and diagrams, regardless of whether they control printing presses or mainframe computers, may yield historical traces of the unknown we call body. What remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or information technologies with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of a technological era, but rather (and in strict accordance to McLuhan) their circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility.

Whosoever is able to hear or see the circuits in the synthesized sound of CDs or in the laser storms of a disco finds happiness. A happiness beyond the ice, as Nietzsche would have said. At the moment of merciless submission to laws whose cases we are, the phantasm of man as the creator of media vanishes. And the situation becomes recognizable.

Already in 1945, in the half-burnt typed minutes of the Army High Command's final conferences, war was named the father of all things: it spawns (in a very free paraphrase of Heraclitus) most technological inventions.[6] And since 1973, when Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was published, it has become clear that real wars are not fought for people or fatherlands, but take place between different media, information technologies, data flows.[7] Patterns and moirés of a situation which has forgotten us...

But in spite or because of it: without the research and contributions of Roland Baumann this book would not have been written. And it would have not have come about without Heidi Beck, Norbert Bolz, Rüdiger Campe, Charles Grivel, Anton (Tony) Kaes, Wolf Kittler, Thorsten Lorenz, Jann Matlock, Michael Müller, Clemens Pornschlegel, Friedhelm Rong, Wolfgang Scherer, Manfred Schneider, Bernhard Siegert, Georg Christoph (Stoffel) Tholen, Isolde Tröndle-Azri, Antje Weiner, David E. Wellbery, Raimar Zons and

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