

Is there an exceptional way for German media theory? This was the theme of a public debate at the University of Siegen (between Cologne and Frankfurt in Germany). I was perhaps the young outside rebel on the panel, in part because of my age, my passport, being an “internet pope”, as chairman Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer described me. Participants were Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford), Friedrich Kittler (Berlin), Irmela Schneider (Cologne), Hartmut Winkler (Paderborn) and Erhard Schüttpelz (Siegen). The German word discussed here was “Sonderweg” (special way).



In his ‘impulse’ speech [Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht](#) (picture above) described the German media theory that emerged in the late 1970s and early 80s as a positive development. Gumbrecht is a German-American literature professor who worked in Siegen from 1986-89 before moving to Stanford and who played a key role in the early days of this intellectual movement. Even though we gathered in a town that is so easily described as dull and small, the research in Siegen and German media theory in general, has never been described as provincial. This was neither the case with Freiburg and Kassel. Gumbrecht emphasized the unique position that media studies had, and still has, in Germany. Gumbrecht: “What is self-evident here, is absent elsewhere. We don’t find media studies faculties in other countries. This is a fact.” As you may know, I agree with this. Ever since the late 1980s I have studied the great books that came out, made interviews, wrote reviews, participated in conferences and workshops and consider myself part of this larger context. In my last book *Zero Comments* I wrote a chapter on the topic. Even more of an expert is the Canadian translator of Friedrich Kittler and others, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (who couldn’t attend the discussion) and who has written on numerous occasions on the exceptional status of German media theory. Starting point of the debate was an essay (including responses) by Winthrop-Young (“On Promised and Doomed Media Nations”, *Zeitschrift fuer Kulturwissenschaften*, 2/2008, in German) in which he compares Canada and Germany.

According to Gumbrecht there was a general birth trauma of the humanities, ever since its emergence in the 19th century, of not being of this world. The media theory that starts to emerge from inside the German literature departments ought to be situated in this out-of-this-world context. Gumbrecht mentioned eight philosophical underpinnings of the German media theory’s special character. I will highlight some of them. There must be reference, something outside of the text, beyond hermeneutics. The

exodus of the spirit out of the humanities. Desire for a reference. Then there is the substance concept. Obviously there is the deconstruction of the subject. We see special interest in history and fascination for philosophical anthropology and long cultural shifts (dating 50.000-100.000 years back). Then there is a early pressure, and desire, ever since Humboldt and the way he designed the university system, to innovate. Ordinary knowledge needs to be taught in highschool or polytechnics. The university is a place for new thinking. This could explain why there is a permanent revolution inside the German universities. Ever since the post-war era there is a constant wave of reforms. This is no in itself a good thing but was a positive condition under which the 1980s media theory programs came into being. Gumbrecht closed off with the observation that the public identity of German professor as a prophet still exists. The professor is a thinker, not an academic project administrator.



I was the first to respond. Ever since the mid 1980s German media theory has been an extraordinary source of inspiration for me because of its conceptual richness, discourse diversity, historical insight and capacity to illustrate highly abstract thinking with imaginative examples. Around 1987 I hitchhiked from Amsterdam to one of the conferences of the Kassel research group where I first heard Kittler, Bolz, Tholen and others speak. In my short statement I expressed that speculative and critical concepts are one and the same thing and only manifest themselves in different ways according to the era. I noted that much had changed over the past 25 years. Even Germany is now firmly subjected to global neo-liberal standards of knowledge production. Germany media theory as we know is a product of the late coldwar prosperity of its welfare state. But how do things work out these days? I pointed at the tremendous opportunities for translations and international dialogue that remain unused and closed with a call to the science funding body DFG to start an ambitious translation program (not just to English) of key works in this area. The market will not do this. Worldwide publishing houses are cutting costs and risky translations are the first to go out. Translations are anyway already a firm part of the national cultural policy instruments that subsidize literature, theatre and contemporary arts as nation and city marketing tools. The fact that theory is not part of this, says more about the declining status of this discursive branch. Compared to the 1980s theory is out of fashion in most region of the planet. This further isolates this particular subset called German media theory whose main

players are about to retire.

Friedrich Kittler disagreed with me and said that all his books are available in English, Japanese and Greek. Even though everyone would agree that he's the perfect exception to the rule, even this statement isn't entirely true. Just visit amazon.com and you'll find three titles of him in English, a thin result compared to the many interesting monographs Kittler wrote over the decades. What doesn't work here anymore is the reading, interpretation and translation circles abroad that would pop up by itself 5 or 10 years after the publication of major theoretical works. Less and less students read German (out of my own experience I would say none in new media programs). Whereas the interest in media theory amongst teaching staff has remained steady, German contributions cannot be taught because of an acute lack of translations, in particular of introductory materials for undergraduate programs. The situation is even worse for the (primarily) German media archeology that, as a field, even remained more scattered.

Hartmut Winkler, who disagrees with Kittler on the 'media a-priori' thesis, stated: "The good thing about Kittler is that it is easy to understand and still is not boring after years of of studying his texts. This cannot be said about all authors." As insiders already know, Kittler laments the lack of technological knowledge in the humanities and is sceptical about the wishy-washy term 'media theory' that has been misused to such a vast extend. Kittler: "Die Mediengeschichte ist ein Steinbruch." It's a treasure chest, but you'll have to do it on your own, so Kittler, not as a part of a program or department.



Irmela Schneider, whose media ethnographic work (dealing with the USA and UK) I do not know stressed that the position inside philosophy remains problematic, and with some exceptions, is one of isolation. Media theory is simply not welcome. As many would know Cologne is a conservative city in this respect. She also said that in the USA there is always an element of the democratic potential of (new) media, which in the German media theory is not explored. Gumbrecht: "In the USA there is an emphasis on the researcher as an individual. People think Kittler is cool, stupid or difficult, but have no awareness of something like German media studies." All seemed to agree that what makes German media theory is exactly its abstract, conceptual nature. In various postings on the Net Florian Cramer has attacked exactly that metaphysical aspect as its main weakness. From his exile in Rotterdam he wrote a long email, in English, which was posted on

the blog of the Siegen event. [You can find it here](#), and I can highly recommend it. Voices of the under 50 or 40 generation completely missed in the debate. I could have represented them, but I didn't feel like. Mainly because the untimely, drifting, weird nature of German media theory which was exactly what I was looking for, trying to escape the flat and uninspiring Dutch and Anglo-saxon pragmatism and politically correct modes of media criticism. Postmodernism and cultural studies just didn't do it for me. They refused to ask the Media Question. Ultimately they shied away to look the Beast straight into the eye. Media isn't just surface and fun. It wasn't enough to reject McLuhanism. There was, and still is, so much more to explore. There was much talk about Heidegger, that afternoon in Siegen. And that's what software studies got ahead of its mission. What is thinking in this networked age of realtime exchange? We need to create the 'interval' to reflect and theorize, and German media theory, with all its shortcomings, still provides us with amazing insights that radically break into the numbness of the crazy everyday life inside the digital regime.

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