

# Adorno's materialism and media (studies)

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*Please note that this is an unpublished conference paper that was solely written for the purpose of being read at a conference, hence the sparse usage of footnotes and other references. The paper was given at the Critical Theory, Film and Media: Where is "Frankfurt" now? conference, Frankfurt am Main, Germany August 20-24, 2014. You can contact the author at [andre.wendler@uni-weimar.de](mailto:andre.wendler@uni-weimar.de). All rights reserved. Feel free to quote. A revised version of this paper might be published elsewhere in the future.*

Other than the title of my paper suggests it will not be very general. Quite the contrary I will come from a rather idiosyncratic starting point that I want to share with you in order to contribute something to the question raised by this conference. I must admit that I do not actually know what Critical Theory actually is. For me, in this paper, it is Adorno and I am sure we will hear a lot of other suggestions as to what Critical Theory is or was.

Let me first tell you where my question is actually coming from. The first generation of Medienwissenschaftler in Germany were not trained as such but at a certain point in their academic careers they became or made themselves Medienwissenschaftler. In a lot of dialogues among these people you will hear a question similar to

"But what kind of scholar are you actually?" and they might respond that actually, *eigentlich*, they are Germanists, art historians, film scholars, philosophers, you name it and that they somehow ended up being Medienwissenschaftler. Some of those wonderfully inventive people were my teachers when I enrolled in a distinctive class of *Medienwissenschaft*. While during my first years we would read anything from Plato to Derrida, from Nicholas of Cusa to Foucault there would remain a distinctive gap. At first I thought for reasons then opaque to me the whole Critical Theory was excluded from my canon. I learned however that it was no problem to read a film scholar of the name of Kracauer or a literary scholar of the name of Benjamin. Later on, for a course assignment I proposed reading Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie* and I had to learn from my professor, that he would not recommend that because that would not lead me anywhere. There it was, the taboo. The lesson was that if you wanted to be heard in media studies you would not try to be heard through the voice of Adorno or Critical Theory. It was immediately clear to me that my diploma thesis would have to prove the opposite. That is how I came to write a piece on Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's films based on operas by Arnold Schoenberg in which the philosopher of cinema Gilles Deleuze and the philosopher of music Theodor Adorno lived peacefully enough side by side.

That is, however, only the beginning of the story. While writing this and while including another chapter on Straub-Huillet's film based on Johann Sebastian Bach later in my dissertation I realized that this kind of music, so called classical music or European Art Music as I'd like to call it, was strangely omitted from *Medienwissenschaft*. That is indeed a rather curious finding, since *Medienwissenschaft* proved not to be especially shy of conquering all other arts: the subjects of art history, of literary studies, of film studies, of the history of sciences and of course of philosophy were all deliberately made the subjects of *Medienwissenschaft* with ease and, I may add, considerable outcomes too. While my teachers had no problems of mentioning Alberti, Heidegger and Kubrick in one and the same paper, Beethoven, Mozart or Brahms would never cross their paths. You would of course be right in naming the exceptions to that rule but the general trend continues to this day. And here is the Adorno that I came to love and read with a lot of greed: it is the Adorno of the book on Mahler's symphonies, of the sociology of music, of the *Philosophie der neuen*

*Musik*, of the unfinished Beethoven book, of the *Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion* which I am going to talk about later in more detail. It is the composer and the pianist Adorno, it is the journalist of music for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that intrigues me.

Now, you can image how thrilled I was when I first heard Friedrich Kittler talking about his last big project: *Musik und Mathematik*, Music and Mathematics. Obviously not anybody but the alleged founder of *Medienwissenschaft* himself finally had put music on the list of subjects to study. This same Friedrich Kittler, however, was the one who dismissed Adorno in the fiercest way wherever he got the chance to do so. In his writing, in his lectures, Kittler knows no discretion or politeness towards Adorno. Wherever he can he goes at great lengths to accuse Adorno of whatever stupidity, ignorance or voluntary misinterpretation he possibly can. I just want to give you one example.

Kittler gave a longish interview to Till Nikolaus Heiseler in 2011 that was published under the rather pompous title *Flaschenpost an die Zukunft* [Message in a bottle to the future] last year. In this text which is full of despicable remarks on his brother and his lovers that I will not repeat here, Kittler aims at Adorno several times. About an unnamed text on musical material he says: "Habe ich gerade letzte Woche gelesen. Ende war dann ziemlich zum Kotzen."<sup>1</sup> [Read it last week. The end almost made me throw up.] Another attempt is even more telling. Several times von Heiseler and Kittler arrive at Adorno's language. Kittler states that his own materialism is connected to a syntactical trick that he trained himself to pursue: getting rid of reflexive pronouns. "Einfach die reflexiven Pronomina vermeiden, also genau dieses kleine Worttierchen zu vermeiden, auf das Adorno sein ganzes Lebenswerk gegründet hat: das Wort *sich*. Der Geist denkt sich, und: es ereignet sich. Ich habe einfach geschrieben: es geschieht. Schwupps, war das *sich* weg und auch das *ich* war verschwunden; und diese ganze reflexive oder transzendente Illusion, es könne jemand sich selber denken oder sich selber erfahren ... Ich habe eigentlich immer

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<sup>1</sup> Till Nikolaus von Heiseler, Friedrich Kittler, 2013, *Flaschenpost an die Zukunft*. Berlin. p. 155.

nur an transitive Relationen geglaubt: *Ich liebe Dich, Du liebst mich*<sup>2</sup> [Just avoid reflexive pronouns, that is the small word-animal on which Adorno founded all his life's work: the word 'sich', itself. The spirit thinks itself, '*es ereignet sich*'. I just wrote: it happens. Hey, Bingo, the 'sich' hat disappeared and so had the 'ich'; and with it had disappeared this whole reflexive or transcendental illusion that somebody could think himself or experience himself ... I actually only believed in transitive relations: I love you, you love me.]

At a later point in the text von Heiseler comes back to the reflexive pronoun and tells Kittler that he once found out that the excessive use of it is related to Adorno's Jewish descent. He explains to Kittler that this particular use of the reflexive pronoun as well as some other stylistic peculiarities of Adorno's are common in Yiddish. Kittler seems to be astonished: "Ja? Tatsächlich? Ach!" [Yes? Really? Oh!] This seems to be as close he can get to recalling an obviously rather blunt argument.

I apologize for taking you through this nitpicking but you realize that this serves therapeutic purposes for me to come to terms with the relationship of Critical Theory to media studies that was forbidden to me so early on in my academic career.

However, this one-way boy's battle is only one side of the coin. The other side is shared interests and in turning to Kittler first I am getting a bit more serious now. Kittler's last major project was meant to stretch over eight books, two of which were actually finished before his death in 2011, covering the time from the invention of the Greek vocal alphabet up to the "Turing time" [Turingzeit] as he called it. In his earlier works Kittler's attention was aimed at uncovering the discourse networks or the medial basis of certain literary or epistemic regimes - 1800 and 1900 famously became the names of two of these. Now, in *Music and Mathematics* Kittler wants to go all the way down in history to what he conceives as the primary writing scene of the West. (As opposed to Kittler I should like to put all these concepts in inverted commas but that would be another paper.) In long readings of most notably Homer's *Odyssey* Kittler reconstructs an early stage in a history of being (*Seinsgeschichte* in the Heideggerian sense) of the West in which the song of a poet, the alphabet in

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<sup>2</sup> von Heiseler, Kittler, 2012, *Flaschenpost*, p. 43.

which this song would be recorded, the sounds of the musical instrument accompanying him and the mathematical transcription of these sounds were still one and the same. The magic tool (and I am trying to use as much of Kittler's very own terms here as possible) to accomplish all this is the Greek vocal alphabet. For the first time, Kittler claims, this alphabet is able to denote all actual sounds of the Greek language and even more: of all other languages too. These same signs, the letters of the Greek alphabet, can however also denote numbers and they can denote musical tones. This makes for its unique or primordial unity in the sense of the history of being. Following some scholars of ancient philology Kittler argues that the *raison d'être* of this alphabet had been nothing else than the recording of Homer's *Odyssey*. Consequentially the *Odyssey* must and can be re-read as self-reflexive writing on its own media basis. The *Odyssey* teaches before anything else about the state of the history of being in Hellas, told through a specific relation between the Gods and the humans.

While Kittler's theories on the origin of the Greek alphabet draw heavily on earlier discussions from classical studies his linking this with considerations on Greek music and tune is more original and more interesting to me here. The decisive new quality of this alphabet is that its letters are no recordings of what you hear but they are an analytical set of instructions of how to speak all the sounds necessary for that language. Winthrop-Young claimed: "This is no doubt the historically most important instance of the rule that we invariably introspect language in terms laid down by our writing systems."<sup>3</sup> In addition to that connection of signs and sounds of a spoken language the Greek alphabet acquires two more functions. The letters get subsequently used as numbers, too. The first nine letters can be read as the ones, the following nine letters as the tenth and the nine letters after these as the hundreds so that all numbers between 1 and 999 can be denoted with the help of the alphabet. "Thus for the first time in the history of writing", Kittler says, "a set of signs was applied to itself; it was recoded"<sup>4</sup> The use of letters as numbers was however only the first of two recodings. The other would use the alphabet for writing down the sound

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<sup>3</sup> Winthrop-Young, 2011, Kittler, p. 89.

of music.

The different notes that can be played on a khitara, a Greek lyre, can be expressed in numerical relations that refer to the division of the string by the fingers. If you want to play the fourth to the keynote of a string, you have to divide that string at the ratio of 4 to 3 or, or noted in Greek numeral letters  $\delta$  delta to  $\gamma$  gamma. I quote Winthrop-Young again: "Kittler's argument is based on the premise that the lyre is *not* to be regarded as a simple musical tool or instrument. It is "a magical thing that connects mathematics to the domain of the senses" (2006b: 56), because it allows for the sensual and the symbolic to be directly translated into each other."<sup>5</sup> Well, this is basically what happens in the first book of *Music and Mathematics*. The second book is about love, Eros. In a short introductory text to Kittler's project by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he anticipated that this book would be greeted with accusations of homophobia and sexism.<sup>6</sup> Well, that is indeed the case, thank you very much, and I will not repeat any of it here.

In the years between the publishing of these two books and his death Kittler gave a number of talks and interviews in which he tried to layout in broad strokes how he planned to project to go on. The next two volumes would have dealt with Rome, "die dummen Römer" who had forgotten all about this wonderful unity and therefore shattered its wholeness in the sense of the history of being. ("Seingeschichtliche Fülle" sounds so much better, I am sorry.) The last four volumes would have followed the history of music and mathematics from the middle-ages through to the present. Kittler here took a look at what became of the unity of mathematics and music and would notice, that the development of modern european harmonic

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<sup>4</sup> zit. nach Winthrop-Young, 2011, Kittler, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Winthrop-Young, 2011, Kittler, p. 95. Die Fußnote im Zitat verweist auf den ersten Halbband von *Musik und Mathematik*, Aphrodite.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 2012, Geleitworte. In: Friedrich Kittler, 2012, *Das Nahen der Götter* vorbereiten. München, Paderborn, S. 8 (»Im selben Kontext schreibt Kittler schließlich eine bedingungslose auf das Weibliche setzende Gender-Perspektive fort, die ihm früher viel Beifall von Feministinnen einbrachte, nun aber mit dem Sog der allgemeinen Athen-Dysphorie in diskursive Zonen gerät, welche politisch korrekte Leser ihm als homophob und als traditionelle Männerphantasien anzukreiden, nicht versäumen werden.«)

systems like the famous Well temperament [Wohltemperierte Stimmung] coincide with the availability of certain mathematical faculties like fractional arithmetics, irrational numbers etc. This would finally culminate in the invention of computers and electronic synthesizers in the 20th century, read through Heidegger's philosophy of technics.

In turning to Adorno now I hope you will be able to see the common ground he shares with Kittler as well as the differences. Well through his career Adorno took notes for a book that was intended to have the title *Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion* [Theory of musical reproduction]. In the 1950s he dictated a longer part which might have been the book's beginning at a length of some 80 printed pages. The larger part however, more than 300 printed pages, are short notes, annotations and references. I like the idea that both projects at stake here are unfinished. Where Kittler hastily sketched a project that had become too big to be finished within his lifetime, Adorno's outline is full of self-critical remarks that in other cases do not belong to the vocabulary of the apodictic author: "(Vorsicht: Theorie noch in sich widerspruchsvoll!)" [In brackets: Attention: theory still contradictory!]

Adorno in a way starts where Kittler would only have gotten towards the end: he is clearly dealing with European Art Music in its proper sense. Whereas Kittler's search goes back to a point in history where things still were whole, Adorno is aiming at a point when things, music that is, have disintegrated to a point of extinction. They both, however, *turn around* classical narratives of the unfolding of distinct arts. For Kittler, that is a side argument that runs along his text, the development of the oft praised Greek Philosophy is the hideous work of people who were obviously unable to grasp the wonders of sung poetry. And Adorno likewise understands the whole history of music after Beethoven not as a growth of modes of musical expression or a complexification of styles but as the ever faster rotating machinery in reaction to a perfection that can be reflected but never superseded. Adorno establishes his theory of musical reproduction as an answer to the age old question of what music is. Were it a language one would have to be able to tell what it means. Were it a mimetic art one would have to be able to tell what it imitates. And in all cases one would have to be able to tell of what music consisted. What would the material of music be? Adorno starts to answer this question in a way that could have given him

away as a reader of Derrida: "Sprache gibt es [...] eigentlich nur als Schriftsprache."<sup>7</sup> [Language only exists as written language.] And much in the style of Kittler, Adorno develops his ontology of music via an investigation of its media of inscription, namely scores and sheet music. While this might seem obvious to post post-structuralist media scholars it would not have been to theorists of music of the first third of the 20th century. The material of art music would here of course have been: sound or as a deduction from that: harmony.

Not so in Adorno. For him a proper understanding of music can only derive from a proper analysis of its media of inscription. Adornos question quite simply is: where is the musical work of art? Nobody will be satisfied in saying it was the score alone. "Die Partitur jedoch, die der Möglichkeit ihrer Aufführung radikal entzogen ist, scheint sinnlos zugleich in sich selber. Der Vorwurf, eine Komposition sei Papiermusik, mag oft genug die reaktionäre Abfertigung rationalisieren. Sein normativer Kern jedoch, es müsse jede Komposition, um als stimmig sich zu erweisen, angemessen realisierbar sein [...] ist legitim."<sup>8</sup> [The score which cannot be played seems to be senseless in itself. Calling a composition paper music is often the ignorant disqualification of reactionaries. Its normative core however, that every composition must be possible to play, is legitimate.] Locating the musical work of art in the performance alone does not make more sense since without the score no performance is even possible. For Adorno thus the musical work of art is the reproduction including the score and all performances, past, present and future, in their mutual dependency. He starts with a longish recollection of sources on the history of modern notation and compares the relation between musical signs and the sounds they are meant to designate with the relation between the letters of an alphabet and their signified. In these paragraphs he virtually touches on every single question that Kittler rises in his theories about the Greek vocal alphabet: the problem of the double signification of letters who at once designate sounds and - as words - also transport a meaning; the problem of mimesis; the possible difference between still reading and reading out

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, 2005/2001, Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion. Frankfurt am Main, S. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, 2005/2001, Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion, 220.

loud.; the self-reflexivity of music and Greek poetry. One thing is striking here: every single thought that Adorno formulates about vocal alphabets and written language is the exact opposite of Kittler's standpoint in that particular question. I just want to name a few: Adorno insists that it is trivial and therefore meaningless to hint at the sheer vocal sound as the signified of letters. In poetry only the actual meaning [*der eigentliche Gehalt*] in the proper sense as the meaning of words could be of interest. Kittler claims that the exact opposite had been the case for the Odyssee. Adorno then tries to show that in language even individual words are not of great interest, since their meaning is only conveyed in whole sentences and likewise in music a single sound is of no great interest because only its relation to the other sound played before, after or with it make its meaning. Kittler in contrast develops in great detail how the Greek *logos* was first a concept applied to elements as small as musical intervals.

Many arguments return in Kittler and Adorno mirror-reversed. The reason for this is obviously a historical one. Kittler refers to that wondrous pre-philosophic wholeness which knew no distinction between sense and sensitivity and that was destroyed according to him somewhere around 400 BCE. Adorno describes language backed up by decidedly modern poetics, that is, from a perspective which has lost the unity by which Kittler is so fascinated. The thinking of wholeness and unity is rather alien to Adorno (and not only for the reason of him being a dialectician). From the few hints Kittler gave on the installment of his project we know that he planned to write his history of music along the lines of the development of different tuning systems. As far as I know the history of notations would not have played a pivotal role in his project. (Now here the fun part starts because I can assume whatever I want about the things Kittler or Adorno never actually mentioned.) For Adorno however, notation does matter a lot. If the ontology of music can be read from its media of inscription it must be in its notation. Adorno distinguishes three different layers of musical texts that he derives from the history of modern notational systems.

The first layer is called "mensural" [*das Mensurale*]. It refers to the direct notational character of musical signs: this note on this line of the staff denotes this one specific point of a scale, this one rest denotes a pause of a determined length etc. The meaning of this layer of musical signs can be learned, it is symbolic and every

student of music must learn the meanings of all these signs just as you would have to learn the sound a specific letter stands for.

The second layer of the musical text in Adorno is called the neumatic [das Neumische]. This name goes back to the Neumes, the system of notation that was in use in Europe from the 9th century and is held to be the direct precursor to our modern staff notation system. Adorno subscribes here to an older interpretation of where the Neumes came from. According to this theory they are related to the movement of the hands of the choir leaders and mimetically depict these. Therefore a gestural quality comes into notation here which can easiest be seen in the rhythmic qualities of notations. Every note is a beat, every note stands for a certain movement of the body, all the notes together stand for the temporal structure of the whole piece.

The last layer of Adorno's conception of the musical text is the idiomatic [das Idiomatische] and this one refers to all the things that are nowhere explicitly denoted in the musical text but implicit in its historical context. Things that go here include the habitual phrasing of certain common motifs, a instrumentation that would not be written but only implied by the genre of the piece etc.

This three-partition is important to Adorno because from here he develops his concept of material historical change. Historical change inevitably occurs on all three levels of the musical text: composers start using new signs to denote things that were not part of the score before, complex rhythmical structures get invented that were unknown before and they call for new notations etc. Whenever such an introduction of new signs into the musical language occurs, it changes not only the newly written work, but all the older ones too. That is one of Adorno's main arguments. Here is one example: in the Baroque it was not common to write out rhythmic structures in all detail. According to the context, the piece or their particular part musicians would know which rhythm they had to apply to regular eighths. They could be played as either dotted notes or plain "as written". When in the 19th century the re-evaluation of baroque compositions started that knowledge had partly fallen in oblivion. That however happened because composers at a certain point started to include these implicit rules into their written text and therefore musicians learned to not improvise on the rhythm that was written, but to play it according to the text. It became very difficult and an exercise of philological research to recover these now

hidden structures. The older works obviously had changed, they could no longer be interpreted in their historic manner. Adorno takes that even a step further. He claims that some elaborate styles of composition and the inventions in notation that came with them only allowed to fully understand the structure of some older works. These, at the same time, lost their original sparc and had to be interpreted in a different way to remain of any interest at all. In this manner Adorno for example looks at Beethoven through the eyes of Wagner and realizes that for both the same works and the same signs become completely incomparable with each other. Every musician, conductor, singer or instrumentalist will forever stand in front of musical texts and must learn to read them in a historical way balancing the mensural, the neumatic and the idiomatic and make decisions of how to interpret them.

If Kittler had followed his lines along the history of musical harmonies and their mathematization he might not have been able to account for this kind of historical change which as Adorno notes is "much more than a change of style or fashion". ["Die Veränderung der Interpretation ist kein Wechsel der Moden", 218] If one reads for instance the lecture Kittler gave in Cologne in 2011 you can get the impression that all there was to the history of western music was a history of musical calculus that went into different tuning systems who were applied to the construction of different instruments. This is certainly true and no musicologist would ever oppose that. And it would certainly account for things like the famous Tristan chord that Kittler never forgot to mention but it would never allow to compare interpretations of Tristan by different conductors; something that according to Adorno's conception of historical materiality would be pivotal.

Now, as you see I could go on comparing the different takes on music of Adorno and Kittler forever; much would have to be said about Adorno's obsession with music in relation to the history of bourgeois society, rationalization, objectification etc.; it would be great to show how similar both theorists construct self-reflexivity in materialist terms. But I should conclude in a different manner.

Why all this? Why would it be worthwhile reading two authors that obviously will never go together smoothly and keep biting and contradicting each other all the time? What, and that was my personal starting point, can media studies learn from Critical Theory of the specific Adorno flavor? I draw four quite personal conclusions:

First of all, I would say, media studies should stop trying to be philosophy. If *Seinsgeschichte* is the thing you feel indebted to that is alright but than do not be surprised that in the telling of 3.000 year long histories you might stumble upon all kinds of actual material that will not fit into your history. All the things that Kittler could never have included into is history but that obviously are part of the history of music speak to this. Adorno felt the same pain when he tried to write a book about his hero Beethoven. This project was doomed because in trying to bend Beethoven so long until he fitted into the Marxist history of the decline of the bourgeoisie his music broke at all parts and ends.

Secondly, I think if media studies had to subscribe to any form of -ism it should be realism. (I would have called it object oriented philosophy but after my last point I am a bit hesitant to do this.) This realism must be able to describe complex networks of things and people, of media and knowledge in a non-reductionist and open-minded way. This way you might be able to understand how Jazz connects to the history of music and this way you might also understand that a world of wholeness bares more than poetry and men and women loving each other like gods.

Thirdly, and I am getting more specific with regard to music, reading is fine and certainly will teach you a lot about alphabets and poetry but when it comes to music you might want to grab that flute and play it. For Adorno listening to music and playing it cannot be separated. Interpreting music, he says, is making it. He was very aware of this and I am still waiting for the book that shows how his own compositions are a better *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* than his texts were. Although many an amused commentary was uttered towards Kittler's media archaeological tour to southern Italy where with singers and boats he restaged Odysseus' way past or to the sirens, why not trust our ears for once instead of only our ability to read? Kittler tried to make generations of *Medienwissenschaftler* to learn how to program a computer. How many actually have?

Lastly: (I am afraid this might again be part of my therapeutic thoughts again.) If as materialist media scholars we truly are interested in the things and media that shape our thinking, that make our senses and that produce our reasoning let us be guided by a sympathy towards these things and not by our membership in scholarly brotherhoods. Fortunately there are sisters now too, sometimes. I will never stand up

for Kittler's elderly-gentlemen's sexism and I will never stand up for Adorno's big-headed drawing room Marxism or what cultural studies have made of it. But I am more than willing to learn whatever I can about the media in question here. You know, I am a material boy and I am especially willing to learn how to build a theory that is more than the application of marxist categories to popular culture and also one that is more than the rather dull attempt at showing that everything has always already been said by Heidegger. The last word, that is my conviction, is for the media themselves not their interpreters.

Thank you very much.