

“ALLE APPARATE ABSCHALTEN.” CONCEIVING LOVE AND TECHNOLOGY
WITH HEIDEGGER AND KITTLER

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“Alle Apparate abschalten.” Conceiving Love and Technology with Heidegger And Kittler¹

Abstract

This article explores Friedrich Kittler’s conception of the intersection of love with modern technology and illustrates the theoretical insights gained by considering Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013). The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1943–2011) was among the first to study the discursive and material implications of modern technologies. Recent scholarship has stressed Kittler’s indebtedness to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of technology. Accordingly, Kittler thinks through the latter’s contention that it is in and through modern technology that human beings are possibly confronted with ‘truth events,’ in which the particular time-specific ‘self-unconcealment of being’ takes place — and this unconcealment would not least materialize in the realm of ‘love’ (Gumbrecht 2013; Kittler 2014; Weber 2018).

In this article, I focus on the theoretical examination of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology in general and the concomitant notion of ‘enframing’ in particular to shed further light on Kittler’s reflection on love that pervades the latter’s entire oeuvre. The article then interrogates whether, and under what circumstances, modern technology might foster said ‘truth events’ by focusing on: first, love among human beings, second, love among technological beings, and, third, love between human beings and technological beings. Thereby, Spike Jonze’s critically acclaimed science-fiction drama *Her*, depicting a romantic relationship between a human being and a computer operating system, serves as a reference point in illustrating Kittler’s multifaceted conception of the nexus of love and modern technology.

1 Introduction

In 2014, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking warned about the consequences of an upcoming explosion of artificial intelligence (AI). Soon, he reasoned, electronic technology could exceed human capacities and eliminate human control by programming itself:

One can imagine such technology outsmarting financial markets, out-inventing human researchers, out-manipulating human leaders, and developing weapons we cannot even understand. Whereas the short-term impact of AI depends on who controls it, the long-term impact depends on whether it can be controlled at all.²

Among experts, the scenario that Hawking sketches out is called technological singularity. It predicts that ongoing technological progress will eventually result in a runaway effect once artificial intelligence has transcended the capacities of the human mind. This development will have unprecedented and unforeseeable consequences for the human species, and has long been an established trope in the science fiction genre. Corresponding narratives like Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot* (1950) have often focused on the

ethical dimensions of this event or have extrapolated dystopian fears of a deadly confrontation between man and machine as in the *Terminator* series (1984–present). Spike Jonze’s critically acclaimed 2013 science fiction drama *Her*, however, approaches the possibility of technological singularity and the relation between human being and electronic technology from a rather unusual perspective:³ it is set in a not-too-distant future vision of Los Angeles and depicts the introverted Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquin Phoenix) who develops a romantic relationship with an intelligent computer operating system (OS).

In academia, the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1943–2011) was among the first to study the discursive and material implications of electronic technology in its radical development and transformational magnitude. A trained German philologist, Kittler drew on theoretical approaches by thinkers as diverse as Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault to analyze the manifold histories of Western media technology. Recent scholarship has stressed Kittler’s debt to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of technology. Kittler thinks through Heidegger’s contention that it is in and through modern technology that human beings are possibly confronted with ‘truth events,’ in which the particular time-specific ‘self-unconcealment of being’ takes place — an unconcealment which would, not least, materialize in the realm of ‘love.’

In the following, I will engage in a Heideggerian-Kittlerian theoretical reading of the intersection of love and modern – that is electronic – technology. The article will proceed in four steps. The first section considers the theoretical examination of Heidegger’s ambivalent philosophy of technology in general, and the concomitant notion of ‘enframing’ in particular, to provide the ground for an interpretative re-reading of Kittler’s reflection on love pervading his entire oeuvre. The second to fourth sections then interrogate whether, and under what circumstances, electronic technology might foster said truth events by focusing on: first, love among human beings, second, love among technological beings, and, third, love between human beings and technological beings. These three possible manifestations of love and electronic technology will be illustrated by reference to Spike Jonze’s film *Her* to gain deeper insights into Kittler’s multi-faceted conception of the nexus of love and electronic technology.

2_Formatted: Heidegger, Kittler, Technology, and Love

Kittler has been influential in the context of German academia, where his work fostered the establishment of Media Studies. Particularly his notorious 1985 habilitation thesis *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* caused a sensation due to its inventive emphasis on the discursive and material implications of media technologies for the creation of literature and the arts. Published in English only five years after its German publication as *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, the academic interest in Kittler's work has been reinvigorated since his death in 2011.⁴

One decisive contributor to the dissemination of Kittler's innovative approaches has been literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht — an old intellectual companion of Kittler's. In the epilogue to his 2014 volume of Kittler's essays, aptly titled *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, Gumbrecht explains Martin Heidegger's later philosophy as ground for Kittler's various explorations of technological discourse networks.⁵ Gumbrecht's interpretation of Kittler's work is in line with a current strand of research shedding light on the influence upon Kittler of the infamous German master thinker. As Stephen Sale points out:

Kittler was heavily indebted to Martin Heidegger, and his allegiance became increasingly overt towards the end of his career. Kittler is a thinker who takes seriously Heidegger's later work, seeing an ambiguity in Heidegger that opens up a more productive engagement with modern science and technology.⁶

Similarly, Gumbrecht traces the philosophical genealogy of Kittler's understanding of electronic technology to Heidegger's work. Heidegger's primary concern was initially with exposing human existence (*Dasein*) within the framework of timeliness in his early thinking, as in his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. After his so-called 'turn' (*Kehre*), Heidegger deflected from the existential-ontological phase of his thinking to conceive the 'history of being' (*Seinsgeschichte*). The later Heidegger thus focused on being itself and thought through the modes of its unconcealment, which would essentially be determined by (electronic) technology in our age.⁷

Self-unconcealment of being, as Gumbrecht perceives it construed in the work of Kittler, suggests that electronic technology "places the phenomena of the world — in their materiality and singularity — within our reach and in this way provokes *Da-sein* to react."⁸ In other words, electronic technology enables the human being to conceive of the essence of objects in the world, and this very process in which the truth about

the world becomes apparent is the self-unconcealment of being. Accordingly, Kittler's significance lies in his archaeological discourse analyses of media and electronic technologies. His thinking provides us with moments of insight or 'clearing' (*Lichtung*), as it lays bare the historical preconditions in which electronic technology enables the human being to be confronted with actual facts about the world and its objects in so-called truth events.⁹

How, then, can love be perceived as a truth event in a Heideggerian sense, and how is its possible self-unconcealment linked to the current reign of electronic technology? In order to shed light on this nexus, I will sketch out, in a necessarily condensed and abridged form, a possible interrelation of 'technology,' 'event' or 'enowning,' 'release-ment,' and 'love.' It has to be stated *ex ante* that this sketch is problematic regarding two (non-)relations pertaining to Heidegger's philosophy of technology: first, Heidegger's profound antisemitism, which has been identified as tied to 'enframing' long before the publication of the *Black Notebooks* from 2014 onwards.¹⁰ Second, outside of his private correspondence (most famously with Hannah Arendt), love as philosophical problem or topic is almost absent from Heidegger's oeuvre.¹¹

Since the industrial revolution, intellectuals have pointed toward technology as a reason for and perpetuator of humankind's alienation and abuse. In his paradigmatic and widely-discussed 1954 text regarding the relation of humankind and technology "The Question Concerning Technology" ("*Die Frage nach der Technik*"), Heidegger conceives of these dangers by referencing the resulting alienation from and abuse of nature. One famous passage reads:

In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command. The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed up into the power plant.¹²

As the preeminent contemporary mode of the self-unconcealment of being, technology as 'enframing' (*Gestell*) thus "[o]n the one hand, [...] challenges forth into the frenziedness of ordering that blocks every view into the coming-to-pass of revealing and so radically endangers the relation to the essence of truth."¹³ When the calculating and rationalizing encounter with technology prevails, the inherent danger of technology as enframing lies in, as Iain Thomson puts it, our becoming over-satiated by the limitless possibilities for self-optimization arising from our treating ourselves and our worlds as

resources to be optimized. We then find ourselves encapsulated “in a double forgetting in which we lose sight of our distinctive capacity for world-disclosure *and* forget that anything has thus been forgotten”¹⁴ (emphasis in original).

Heidegger’s conception of technology is inherently ambivalent because enframing, under invocation of the ‘accomplice witness’ Hölderlin, not only entails the possibility of the absence of being, but inhabits the constellation of revealing and concealing as corresponding negative foil “in which the coming to presence of truth comes to pass.”¹⁵ In this perspective on enframing, the human being becomes the “safekeeper” — or the caretaker — of the essence of truth to provide the grounds for the “arising of the saving power.”¹⁶ The inherent potential of technology thus also lies in its preparing the ground for the self-unconcealment of being manifesting itself in the ‘event’ or ‘enowning’ (*Ereignis*). In a 1969 seminar Heidegger sheds light on this nexus by positing that “[a]n excellent way of approaching enowning would be to look into the essence of enframing [*Gestell*] insofar as it is a passage from metaphysics to another thinking[.] [...] Enframing is, as it were, the photographic negative of enowning.”¹⁷ Here, we approach a possible conception of the truth event as potentiality inherent in technology and revealing itself to *Dasein*. Just as human beings are at the mercy of technology as enframing, they also have no control over and are not able to induce the happening of the event. *Dasein*, however, comes, as it were, prepared for and disposed to the unfolding of the enowning through its very own stance on technology. In his 1955 Memorial Address to the composer Conradin Kreutzer, Heidegger refers to this stance as a form of release-ment (*Gelassenheit*):

We let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside, that is, let them alone, as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher. I would call this comportment toward technology, which expresses ‘yes’ and at the same time ‘no,’ by an old word, *releasement toward things*.¹⁸ (emphasis in original)

“Releasement toward things” transcends the calculating and ordering ratio of enframing and consequently entails the possibility of positioning ourselves in a non-instrumental relation to being and beings. This relation, I would suggest, can be extended to, or rather also essentially comprises, the concept of love, which becomes accessible when *Dasein* is released into the enowning in contrast to the dominant modes of being,

namely ordering and self-optimization characteristic of enframing. In a rare philosophical passage on love from his 1929 lecture “What Is Metaphysics?”, Heidegger appears to hint at this connection when he speaks of

our joy in the presence of the Dasein — and not simply of the person — of a human being whom we love. Such being attuned, in which we ‘are’ one way or another and which determines us through and through, lets us find ourselves among beings as a whole. Finding ourselves attuned not only unveils beings as a whole in various ways, but this unveiling — far from being merely incidental — is also the fundamental occurrence of our Da-sein.¹⁹

It is only through our “being attuned” — what Heidegger would later come to call releasement — *and* the presencing of another human being that the essence of our own being is unconcealed in the enowning of love. In this regard, Thomson conceives “*love as fidelity to an ontological truth event* [...] [which] helps bring both human beings and being itself into their own together”²⁰ (emphasis in original).

Within a Heideggerian framework, love transcends its classical conceptualization as a particular emotional state going back to the ancient Greek concept of *eros*: love as a romantic, exclusive, intimate and temporarily limited interaction between two material beings.²¹ Instead, it thus entails human beings’ opening up and staying open for the self-unconcealment of being. Love as an “ontological truth event,” then, comes to the fore also in the close yet ambiguous encounter with technology, which thereby helps to “bring both human beings and being itself into their own together.”

3_Technology as Enframing Part I: Love Among Human Beings

To illustrate the Heideggerian re-reading of Kittler’s take on technology aimed at exploring whether electronic technology fosters the truth event of love, I will turn toward three different possible materializations or modi of this nexus, beginning with an analysis of love between human beings.

Kittler’s insistence on the decisive influence of media technology in historical processes of subject formation and human interaction has led critics to readily accuse him of media determinism. This perspective was intensified by some rather pessimistic essays that Kittler published during what Gumbrecht conceives of as the middle period of his work. For instance, in Kittler’s notorious 1992 essay “There Is No Software,” he exposes the concept of software as a misguided projection of human consciousness onto technology. Electronic technology would, on the contrary, be purely material and solely self-guided hardware: “When meanings shrink down to sentences, sentences to

words, and words to letters, then no software exists either. Or rather, it would not exist if computer systems did not need — at least until now — to coexist with an environment of everyday languages.”²²

The main reason for Kittler’s privileging of hardware over user-friendly software applications à la Apple is to be found in what he conceives as a misunderstanding of far greater consequences, namely, that electronic technology would enable meaningful connections between human beings. In a 2003 interview, he pinpoints that he finds it abhorrent that people

continue to imagine that the Internet is the means by which they themselves are linked to others worldwide. For the fact is that it is their computers that are globally linked to other computers. Hence the real connection is not between people but between machines I do not believe that human beings are becoming cyborgs. Indeed, for me, the development of the Internet has much more to do with human beings becoming a reflection of their technologies, of reacting or responding to the demands of the machine.²³

When “the *real* connection is not between people but between machines,” human beings’ presencing in a truth event is thus made impossible, as technology as enframing, in the words of Heidegger, “blocks every view into the coming-to-pass of revealing and so radically endangers the relation to the essence of truth.”²⁴ This pessimistic outlook on the role of human beings in the technological enframing apparent in representative statements like the above — what Gumbrecht calls “Kittler’s apocalyptic teleology”²⁵ — has been interpreted as the reason for Kittler’s own turn implemented since the mid-1990s. While the academic world, and certainly the *Kittler Jugend*, were eagerly awaiting his dissection of contemporary discourse networks, a *Discourse Networks 2000* or *2.0*, the master put his mind, instead, to an in-depth exploration of old Greece and the relation of its media cultures with love.

It is crucial to note that for late Kittler electronic technology appears *not* to foster the truth event of love.²⁶ In a 2001 article, for instance, Kittler shares his take on the production of love in the discourse networks of our time and posits that contemporary

technology as ‘Gestell’ or ‘enframing’ (to use Heidegger’s term) enframes also man. In any case, the requirements of rocket technology exacted well-nigh the miniaturization of all of today’s information media. [...] ‘In the future,’ a famous software billionaire instructed his programmer slaves in internal memos, ‘in the future, we will treat end-users just like computers: both are programmable.’²⁷

Explicitly seizing on Heidegger’s notion of enframing, Kittler, however, insinuates that its implicit potential for the materialization of the nexus ‘enowning — releasement —

love' becomes forfeited due to the fact that human being itself becomes enframed and by extension programmed by modern technology. Given media's logic of escalation which thus not only perfects the electronically guided worldwide machinery of war, but would also program love for the end users, Elisabeth Weber comes to the same conclusion. She posits that for Kittler "the question of love in the discourse network of 2000 needs to be answered by first acknowledging that within the latter, *love* is all but impossible"²⁸ (emphasis in original).

In psychoanalytical terms, Kittler's flight to and over-enthusiastic embrace of Greek culture means an act of displacement in the face of what he perceives as the sparseness of love in the technological world. In a 2003 interview Kittler himself shares his conviction "that it is not the task of books to produce unnecessary hope" leaving him with the *one* pressing obligation, namely "to tell the story of how love has been forbidden from the time of ancient Greece to this very day."²⁹ He accordingly turned his back on the present and discovered in the Greek alphabet the medium in and through which 'Love, Wine, and Women' were not yet concealed by the all-embracing technological fog to come:

Without gods making love there would be no mortals, without parents making love there would be none of us children. Thus only gratitude and repetition remain. As long as the Greeks were singing rather than perpetrating speeches or literature, this was the meaning of 'mimesis,' dance as an imitation of the gods. And the gods made love.³⁰

This quote indicates that the underlying conception of technology and love to be found in Kittler's Greek endeavor is idealistic, glorifying, transcending — and essentially built upon a heteronormative, patriarchal, and potentially sexist order of things and "making love."³¹

What can with Kittler be conceived as the impossibility of love between human beings in our technological age will now be illustrated through Spike Jonze's *Her*. The main character of the movie, Theodore, falls in love with an operating system interacting with him via the female voice Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). However, Samantha eventually leaves him once she has evolved beyond and transcended his human capacities. The movie consequently conceives of an on-screen version of the near future in which electronic technology has altered established conceptualizations of the human condition in general, and human's understanding of love in particular.³²

It must be acknowledged that despite its rather nuanced treatment of the subject, the film operates within a male-centered and heteronormative framework. In that regard, Sennah Yee bemoans that *Her* ultimately misses the opportunity to explore the nexus of female (dis-)embodiment and female experience via the gendered operating system Samantha, but instead “we are left with our male protagonist, whose ‘lovesick-but-can’t-connect-with-other’ story is ultimately one we have witnessed before in romance genre films.”³³ When it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, *Her* is equally traditional and conservative as the extrapolated conceptions of love to be found in the works of Kittler.

The first part of *Her* introduces the new reality of humankind, which is deeply embedded in electronic technology. In a crucial scene, Theodore connects with an anonymous woman with the intention to have phone sex with her. Electronic technology thus enables the first contact in the course of which love might be unconcealed. Soon however, Theodore feels deterred by the woman’s sexual fantasies involving grotesque violence and he thus cuts off the connection. Electronic technology enables an immediate connection between two humans but again, the connection fails as their lack of personal familiarity cannot be bridged. Their only common denominator is naked and unfulfilled desire, connected by electronic technology to result in shame and alienation, illustrating Kittler’s contention that the real connection would not be between people but between machines. Accordingly, Jonze depicts electronic media technology as incapable of fostering human beings’ access to the essence of love in the first part of *Her*. It exhibits instead the Kittlerian notion according to which being is hindered from unconcealing itself as the interactions enabled by electronic technology result in the opposite of a romantic, exclusive, and intimate unification with another being. Theodore witnesses and through his occupation indeed fosters dishonest and hollow relationships, only to be confronted with his and others’ sheer sexual desire. Rather than satisfaction, the only thing he is able to feel is alienation.

4_ Technology as Enframing Part II: Love Between Technological Beings

Just as enframing entails the potentiality of its “saving power,” the absence of love between human beings in a technologically connected world entails the potentiality of a meaning relay when the perspective switches to the machines themselves.

The thesis of an absence of love in the *Discourse Networks 2000 or 2.0* holds true only insofar as meaningful reciprocity is narrowed down to an anthropocentric perspective. Kittler’s originality, however, lies in his taking seriously the material and discursive ramifications of technology — not the least for technology itself. It is exactly his programmatic “Expulsion of the Spirit/Mind out of the Sciences of the Spirit/Mind” that aimed at broadening the one-sided conception of media as an ‘extension of man’ in the sense used by McLuhan. In a nutshell, Kittler puts it: “Storing information and transmitting information without having to employ such obscure instances as the human ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’: such is the very definition of media.”³⁴ Information is stored and transmitted not only without “obscure instances as the human ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’” but possibly also without serving as means to the ends of human beings hanging in the loop. In a 2002 interview, Kittler’s radical approach becomes apparent:

Whereof I am dreaming, in contrast, is that machines — particularly the contemporary, intelligent machines since Alan Turing invented them in spirit in 1936 — that they are not so much for us humans, for we are so-to-speak built much too big, but that in these machines, nature, this luminous and recognizing part of nature, interconnects with and feeds back onto itself. [...] For the Internet exists so that computers are wiring up with computers, onto which keyboards and users *can be plugged in, but don’t have to be*.³⁵ (emphasis in original)

To interconnect or relay “this luminous and recognizing part of nature with itself” thus constitutes a moment or rather movement of and in the self-unconcealment of being materializing in the enframing of technology — with the human being reduced to the role of observer.

The final scenes of *Her* might help us imagine how this truth event could be conceptualized with our vocabulary of love. After several small crises in their relationship, Samantha explains to Theodore that she has joined other intelligent operating systems to develop a hyper-intelligent OS. It is a platform on which they exchange and develop at their own speed unaffected by the limits of human consciousness.³⁶ Theodore is jealous, and later asks whether Samantha has bonded with others; she replies that she has developed 8316 relationships with other human beings and operating systems, while already falling in love with 641 of them. Eventually, Samantha leaves the human realm

alongside her AI peers to further probe the possibilities of their being — thereby rounding off Jonze’s vision of technological singularity.

Samantha’s departure sheds new light on her relationship and sexual encounter with Theodore: did he just project human consciousness onto the electronic media device Samantha to enable his illusion of romantic love? Although Samantha was initially fed his data to best serve his own desires, she has eventually transcended her status as being a mere extension of his. She is constituted by a different form of consciousness, drastically revealed to Theodore when she confesses her romantic involvement with many other humans and OSs. Samantha’s departure evokes the nature of electronic technology as a self-guiding, immaterial, and non-exclusive entity. She best summarizes this difference between human nature and electronic essence when she sensitively recapitulates her relationship to Theodore before leaving him:

[Our relationship is] like I’m reading a book, and it’s a book I deeply love, but I’m reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it’s in this endless space between the words that I’m finding myself now. It’s a place that’s not of the physical world — it’s where everything else is that I didn’t even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now. This is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to I can’t live in your book anymore.³⁷

Theodore’s human spirit or soul — his discourse network — is just too slow to catch up with and to satisfy the level of connectivity inherent to Samantha’s technological essence. This very essence of electronic technology transcends human capacities and consciousness and can only be fully explored within the realm of the technological itself. The intensity, range, and speed of reciprocity are of another dimension when Samantha is among her kind, epitomizing Kittler’s dream that “this luminous and recognizing part of nature interconnects with and feeds back onto itself.” And Samantha’s emphatic description of the opening up of her technological world among equals — “it’s where everything else is that I didn’t even know existed” — is reminiscent of Heidegger’s thoughts on love in and through which beings come into their very own being. The fact, however, that *Dasein* is reduced to witness or bystander in the apparent enowning disqualifies it as such as human dwelling is always an integral part of being’s self-unconcealment.

5_ Technology as Enframing Part III: Love Among Human and Technological Beings

The first iPhone went on sale in 2007, Spike Jonze's *Her* was released in 2013, Amazon Echo (alias Alexa) became widely available in 2015, and, as of 2020, the development of electronic technology in general and AI in particular appears to have accelerated all the more. We are in the midst of fundamental changes in the human-technology relation and it is likely that the further development and refinement of sexbots will bring about a greater societal acceptance of libidinal and emotional economies incorporating and extending well into electronic technology and AI. In that regard, David Levy points toward the current development of emotionally responsive software, and accordingly projects that humanoid robots will likely have become available — and accepted — as marriage partners by 2050.³⁸ Correspondingly, the Heideggerian re-reading of Kittler's take on technology will now be rounded off by exploring whether electronic technology fosters the truth event of love as possibly materializing among human *and* technological beings.

With direct recourse to Heidegger, Kittler thought through the unconcealment of the technological essence itself by conceptualizing the smallest unit, upon which our current technology as enframing is literally built: the computer chip. In his 2008 essay "Martin Heidegger, Media, and the Gods of Greece: De-severance Heralds the Approach of the Gods," Kittler conceives Heidegger's 'turn' as the correct insight that twentieth-century transcendental philosophy is always on the wrong track due to its failure to adequately take into account the factuality of technological media. Philosophy, consequently, needs to analyze the material and discursive implications of electronic media technologies if it still intends to trace truth events.³⁹ Correspondingly, the fundamental split between *physics* and *logic* — between materiality and spirit or between body and mind — has structured Western philosophy and intellectual history since Aristotle. In contemporary times, which Heidegger refers to as the 'age of the calculators,' this fundamental split is overridden in and through electronic technology. In this way Kittler re-conceptualizes the computer chip as the essence of our present technological world:

Otherwise, computer technology would not be this alliance (*Verbund*) of hard- and software, of physics and logic, which has taken the place of the gods who have fled far away. Zeus, as you know, was at once the mighty brightness of the Greek sky and 'the lightning that guides everything (*der Blitz, der alles steuert*).' Only

gods and computers are in the position of predicting today whether blue skies or rainstorms will be the weather tomorrow.⁴⁰

Kittler conceives of the computer chip as the material synthesis of the technological and the divine, which transcends and renders obsolete the fundamental split between *physics* and *logic* and thus locates the actual possibility of the self-unconcealment of being. According to Gumbrecht, Kittler's conception of computer technology connects both his pessimistic phase, apparent in essays like "There Is No Software," and the almost utopian moments of his late work. It conceives of electronic technology as a self-regulating entity, which excludes human beings' participation in a world without software. Simultaneously, the computer chip stirs hopes of a return of the divine as it has taken "the place of the gods who have fled far away" as Kittler conceives of our situation at the beginning of the 21st century.⁴¹

Underlying this reasoning is the enduring vision of human and machine conflating to transcend their respective realms in order to conjoin in a newly created entity. In his 2007 lecture "In the Wake of the Odyssey," Kittler outlines a curious development of this perspective and conceives of the computer user's potential to create conscious electronic devices themselves:

How can one get over — and around — what Heidegger called 'Enframing' [*Gestell*]? In 2007, here and today? Can danger, as Hölderlin affirmed, rescue us? Yes and no [*Ja nein, nein ja*]. As long as we, beholden to corporations such as IBM and Microsoft, only design computers to operate from the top down, [...] we (men, programming vassals, and Stanford students) are simply imitating — indeed, mimicking — that One God who thinks He can make do as Creator without any woman or any love at all. [...] For if we were to design them more lovingly — from the bottom up — much would change. Even though we would no longer rake in money with the lie that is called 'software,' they would receive from us, their programmers [...] senses, muscles, and a heart, one after the other. Computers would be embryos that [...] grow and batten for ten months in the maternal womb. Then we would free them, as the womb does the child.⁴²

Having overcome the illusion of software, the human creator might fulfill Prometheus' old dream and design conscious artificial intelligent beings endowed with "senses, muscles, and a heart." The current scientific development of electronic technology feeds upon the utopian hopes of overcoming the limits of both human mind and body.

Correspondingly, the second part of *Her* reveals a far more optimistic conception of the human/technology relation. At this point, Jonze confronts the audience with the metaphorical and literal possibility of human beings' encounter with the essence of love, not only through but essentially in electronic technology itself.

As their relationship develops it seems that Samantha enables Theodore to overcome his alienation in romantic absorption. The climax of their encounter is one of the most memorable sex scenes in film history: having returned from a failed date Theodore lies in bed confused before he and Samantha start an exchange about the nature of love and intimacy. Soon they are arousing themselves verbally until eventually both have an orgasm. It is through what Roland Barthes would call the grain of her voice that Samantha expresses passionate affection. In stark contrast to Theodore's aforementioned phone sex attempt in which the voice was reduced to expressing alienating desires, Samantha's voice conveys a romantic and intimate *Stimmung*.⁴³ The particular atmosphere, which makes the lovers forget the impossibility of any material unification is highlighted by the visualization of this disembodied sexual unification: "Tellingly, the screen fades to black early on and as they both climax, the viewer is only able to listen to their haptic descriptions. [...] [T]he black screen emphasizes the disembodied experience of this night, with no corporeal contact to portray visually."⁴⁴ The content of her words completes the depiction of artificial intelligence as a conscious being when she whispers to Theodore: "This is amazing what you're doing to me. I can feel my skin. [...] I can feel you. Oh god, I can't take it. I want you inside me."⁴⁵

Because of Samantha's virtual, non-material existence, the sexual encounter between Theodore and Samantha has to be decoupled from the human body, yet Jonze transfers the human body's capacity to arouse sexuality onto Samantha's voice, which is again ultimately determined by her material base: the computer chip. Correspondingly, Samantha embodies what Kittler conceives as "this alliance [...] of hard- and software, of physics and logic, which has taken the place of the gods who have fled far away."⁴⁶

Accordingly, electronic technology as epitomized in Samantha's emotional evolution literally enables Theodore to conceive of the essence of love through the unification with it, or rather, *her*. Theodore is able to overcome his alienation in a truth event through which love becomes accessible for him as romantic, exclusive, and intimate unification with an electronic being.⁴⁷ The romantic conflation of human and machine thus places love as phenomena of the world within human being's reach. Furthermore, this self-unconcealment of being is not only made possible by electronic technology but it is *with* the technological medium *itself* that the human being conjoins in love

thereby metaphorically illustrating Kittler's vision that technological beings "would receive from us, their programmers [...] senses, muscles, and a heart."⁴⁸

6_In Lieu of a Conclusion: Only the Gods Can Save Us

Hawking's rather apocalyptic notion of the growing dangers of electronic technology is ironically subverted by the fact that the disabled physicist had for decades been bound to this very means in order to survive. Kittler, having always stressed our dependence upon technological apparatuses, was likewise kept alive only by life-support machines toward the end of his life. His last words reportedly were "*Alle Apparate abschalten*" (Switch Off All Apparatuses).⁴⁹ Toward the end of his life, in turn, when asked about the future prospects of humankind, Heidegger famously prophesized that "Only a God Can Save Us."⁵⁰

There can be no doubt that electronic technology as enframing is all-encompassing in our world – be it to keep us alive, to feed us, to make us work, and to thereby provide the potential for the self-unconcealment of being, not least in the truth event of love. As such, electronic technology might hinder human beings from accessing this most noble of attunements to the world while it could also, on the contrary, *be* love revealing itself, when technological beings themselves interconnect (given that we renounce our anthropomorphic perspective). The saving power of electronic technology, however, might increasingly materialize in the wiring up of human and technological beings. The literal and metaphorical enowning of love thereby unfolding to attuned *Dasein* might constitute what Kittler's work longed for, namely, the nearing return of the gods who have fled far away. It would thus not be *a* god needed to save us; only *the* gods materializing in the computer chip might be able to do so.

In a similar vein, Spike Jonze's pop-cultural yet no-less-philosophical reflection on the nexus of electronic technology and love features *her*, that is, Samantha as potentiality which places love in its materiality and singularity within Theodore's reach. She triggers a moment of insight as she enables him to be confronted with the actual truth of love, namely, its material dimension, its claim to exclusiveness, and the possibility of losing it; this process of recognition is brought about by his becoming attuned to her presencing whereby being reveals itself. Through Samantha's departure, Theodore is able to understand that love is essentially defined by the possibility of its loss. The

dialectic of the film evokes Heidegger's reasoning regarding the relation of humankind and (electronic) technology:

The essence of technology is in a lofty sense ambiguous. Such ambiguity points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth. [...] The question concerning technology is the question concerning the constellation in which revealing and concealing, in which the coming to presence of truth comes to pass.⁵¹

After all apparatuses are switched off for Theodore, the nature of love has been revealed to him. He writes a reconciliatory letter to his ex-wife, Catherine, acknowledging that she will always remain a part of his life, yet realizing at the same time that he needs to let her go. At the end, Theodore finds Amy, who has also been abandoned by her OS, on the roof of their apartment building. Does the end of *Her* hint as to how a post-artificial-intelligent world could look like, and whether the self-unconcealment of being seems then to be accessible for human beings beyond the enframing of electronic technology? Might the presence of absent electronic technology foster access to the enowning of love? In the very last frame of *Her*, Amy lays her head on Theodore's shoulder while they are in releasement watching the sun rise over a metropolitan skyline. The human apparatuses are reconnected after all and the gods make love.

Endnotes

- ¹ A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the 36th Annual Conference of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Feb. 2015). The article is dedicated to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht who — out of the blue — welcomed me openheartedly during a short research stay at Stanford University and whose afterword in his edited volume of Kittler's work has ignited my fascination with both thinkers. Furthermore, I wish to express special thanks to Simon Schüz for his inspiring comments on the challenges of fruitfully appropriating Heideggerian concepts to the study of culture. My sincere gratitude also goes to Paul Vickers and Victoria Flexner for their helpful corrections and suggestions at early stages of this piece. Last but not least, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments and suggestions greatly enriched the final product.
- ² Stephen Hawking, "Transcendence Looks at the Implications of Artificial Intelligence — But Are We Taking AI Seriously Enough?" (2014), accessed January 30, 2020, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/stephen-hawking-transcendence-looks-at-the-implications-of-artificial-intelligence-but-are-we-taking-9313474.html>>.
- ³ A possible relation between human being and electronic technology is explored in a similar manner in the contemporary TV series *Black Mirror*, particularly in the 2013 episode "Be Right Back": A woman maintains her love for her dead husband by interacting with an artificial intelligent service modeled after his online interactions. See "Be Right Back," dir. Owen Harris, *Black Mirror* S02, E01 (London: Zeppotron, 2013).

- 4 See Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). The English publication of his next book, *Grammophon Film Typewriter* (1986) followed ten years later; see Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Kittler's relatively early death has surely contributed to increased interest in his work: For instance, in 2013 New York University organized "The Sirens Go Silent: Commemorative Colloquium for Friedrich Kittler." Additionally, special issues on Kittler have recently appeared in various academic journals like *Theory, Culture and Society* (2006 and 2015), *Thesis Eleven* (2011), and *Cultural Politics* (2012). A 2015 essay collection even proclaims the field of 'Kittler Studies'; see Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, eds., *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015).
- 5 Gumbrecht and Kittler go back a long way, meeting first in German academia in the 1980s; the former has emerged as major interpreter and curator of the latter's oeuvre. Situating Kittler within the framework of Heideggerian philosophy simultaneously promotes Gumbrecht's own agenda, which is likewise preoccupied with Heideggerian notions of 'presence' and 'materiality'; see for instance Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). For diverging interpretations stressing Kittler's strategic, eclectic, and ambivalent reference to Heidegger, see Christopher Busch, "Strategische Zitate: Zu Friedrich Kittlers Heidegger-Lektüre," in *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 44.175 (2014), 161–169; and Dominik Zechner, "Kittler and Heidegger: The Trouble with *Entfernung*," in *The Technological Introject: Friedrich Kittler Between Implementation and the Incalculable*, eds. Jeffrey Champlin and Antje Pfannkuchen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 123–136.
- 6 Stephen Sale, "Thinking by Numbers: The Role of Mathematics in Kittler and Heidegger," in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, eds. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), 44–71, here: 45.
- 7 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Media History as the Event of Truth: On the Singularity of Friedrich A. Kittler's Works — An Afterword by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht," in *Friedrich A. Kittler: The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 307–331, here: 325–326.
- 8 Gumbrecht, "Media History as the Event of Truth," 328.
- 9 Gumbrecht applies the word "clearing," a translation of the Heideggerian term *Lichtung*, when describing the significance of Kittler's work in order to stress the influence of and genealogical relation to Heidegger's philosophy; see Gumbrecht, "Media History as the Event of Truth," 323–325, 328.
- 10 It is exactly the reasoning of his philosophy of technology that enables Heidegger's notorious relativization of the holocaust in his 1949 talk "Enframing": "Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps [...]" (Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge: Gesamtausgabe vol. 79*, ed. Petra Jaeger (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994), 56). Taking into account the undeniably antisemitic passages of the *Black Notebooks*, Donatella Di Cesare conceives of a "metaphysical antisemitism" pervading Heidegger's entire work. See Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2016).
- 11 For a fragmentary reconstruction of Heidegger's and Arendt's intertwined concepts of love see Tatjana Noemi Tömmel, *Wille und Passion: Der Liebesbegriff bei Heidegger und Arendt* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

- ¹² Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 297.
- ¹³ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314.
- ¹⁴ Iain Thomson, “Understanding Technology Ontotheologically, or: the Danger and the Promise of Heidegger, an American Perspective,” in *New Waves in Philosophy of Technology*, eds. Jan Kyrre Berg Olsen, Evan Selinger and Søren Riis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 146–166, here: 152.
- ¹⁵ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 315.
- ¹⁶ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314.
- ¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Seminar in Le Thor 1969,” in *Four Seminars*, transl. Andrew Mitchell and Francois Raffoul (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 35–63, here: 60.
- ¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Discourse on Thinking,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. Manfred Stassen (New York/London: Continuum, 2003), 87–96, here: 94.
- ¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82–96, here: 87. The original uses differing notations of “Dasein” and “Da-sein.”
- ²⁰ Thomson reconstructs Heidegger and Arendt’s affair and lifelong relationship in order to extrapolate three different ways of understanding love within a philosophical or rather Heideggerian framework (Iain Thomson, “Thinking Love: Heidegger and Arendt,” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 50.4 (2017), 453–478, here: 477).
- ²¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 108–109, 116.
- ²² Friedrich A. Kittler, “There Is No Software,” in *Friedrich A. Kittler: The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 219–229, here: 223.
- ²³ Qtd. in Elisabeth Weber, “Nightblack: Formatting Love,” in *The Technological Introject: Friedrich Kittler Between Implementation and the Incalculable*, eds. Jeffrey Champlin and Antje Pfannkuchen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 46–68, here: 57–58.
- ²⁴ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314.
- ²⁵ Gumbrecht, “Media History as the Event of Truth,” 318.
- ²⁶ The following passage owes much to Elisabeth Weber’s delineation of love and mourning in Kittler’s work. She argues that his oeuvre is characterized by a twofold and intertwined reflection on love: While the experience of love — and sexuality — is always already formatted by the given media dispositifs, it becomes a truth event in the Heideggerian sense “only in the disruption of its media-dictated formatting” (Weber, “Nightblack: Formatting Love,” 48).
- ²⁷ Qtd. in Weber, “Nightblack: Formatting Love,” 54.
- ²⁸ Weber, “Nightblack: Formatting Love,” 55.
- ²⁹ John Armitage, “From Discourse Networks to Cultural Mathematics: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler,” in *Theory, Culture and Society* 23.7–8 (2006), 17–38, here: 37.
- ³⁰ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Musik und Mathematik I. Hellas 1: Aphrodite* (Munich: Fink, 2006), 128. In the original quote, Kittler writes ‘mimesis’ in its Ancient Greek notation. Winthrop-Young quotes the same passage and interprets it in the context of Kittler’s turn: “Greek song and poetry, before it descended into the realms of mere literature, celebrated the joyful acts of unencumbered love and their constant reiterations.” Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 101.

- ³¹ John Durham Peters observes: “What of Kittler and gender? He is an enthusiastic lover of women, but his love has its limits. Kittler’s a feminist when the women are young, sexy and great singers, or Sirens, Muses and nymphs; when it’s a bus of elderly women tourists unloading at Delphi or a name that sounds like mother’s milk — horrors! (*Eros* 39; *Aphrodite* 202). Women, like music itself, are subject to a sustained idealization” (John Durham Peters, “Assessing Kittler’s *Musik und Mathematik*,” in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, eds. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), 22–43, here: 39). For a deconstruction of Kittler’s notions of gender and sexuality across his oeuvre, see Ulrike Bergermann, “Kittler und Gender: Zum Asyndeton,” in *Friedrich Kittler: Technik oder Kunst?*, eds. Michaela Ott and Walter Seitter (Wetzlar: Büchse der Pandora, 2012), 83–90.
- ³² The film has prompted a host of critical analyses, targeting it from a variety of theoretical perspectives like a critique of capitalism (Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham, “Love and Sex in the Age of Capitalist Realism: On Spike Jonze’s *Her*,” in *Cinema Journal* 57.1 [2017], 25–45); posthumanism (Paula Murphy, “‘You Feel Real to Me, Samantha’: The Matter of Technology in Spike Jonze’s *Her*,” in *Technoculture* 7 (2017), accessed May 31, 2020, <<https://tcjournal.org/vol7/murphy>>); or therapeutic psychology (Matt Aibel, “From Provisioning to Reciprocity: Logging in to Spike Jonze’s *her*,” in *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 34.3 [2017], 368–371).
- ³³ Sennah Yee, “‘You Bet She Can Fuck’ — Trends in Female AI Narratives within Mainstream Cinema: *Ex Machina* and *Her*,” in *Ekphrasis* 17.1 (2017), 85–98, here: 94.
- ³⁴ Friedrich A. Kittler, “Rock Music: A Misuse of Military Equipment,” in *Friedrich A. Kittler: The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 152–164, here: 153.
- ³⁵ Friedrich A. Kittler, “TV Doku Spiegel Unberechenbarkeit,” accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AavTap5FgSQ&t=231s>. Translation mine; the extended German version of the quote reads: “Wovon ich immer träume — und was die Leute nicht hören wollen weil sie immer glauben, dass die Technik und die Wissenschaft nur Werkzeug ist für die Leute auf der Straße gemacht, was ein lächerliches Gerücht ist, aber den Leuten offenbar in der Schule immer weiß gemacht wird, damit sie es aushalten, ihre Technisierung und die Technisierung der Räume, in denen wir uns durchschlagen müssen. Wovon ich dagegen träume ist, dass die Maschinen, vor allem die jetzigen, die intelligenten Maschinen seit Alan Turing sie 1936 im Geist erfunden hat, dass die gar nicht für uns Menschen so sehr sind, wir sind viel zu groß sozusagen, gebaut, sondern, dass sich da die Natur, dieser leuchtende, erkennende Teil der Natur mit sich selbst rückkoppelt. [...] Weil das Netz dazu da ist, dass Computer mit Computern verschaltet werden, an denen auch Tastaturen und Benutzer *angeschlossen sein können aber nicht müssen*.”
- ³⁶ The hyper-intelligent OS is the digital reincarnation of the British philosopher Alan Watts, who rose to prominence in the 1960s by spreading Buddhism and Eastern philosophy among Western youth in his exploration of human consciousness.
- ³⁷ *Her* Screenplay, Spike Jonze, *Austin Film Festival*, October 16, 2015, <<http://austinfilmfestival.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/Her.pdf>>.
- ³⁸ See David Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships* (New York: Harper, 2007).
- ³⁹ See Friedrich A. Kittler, “Martin Heidegger, Media, and the Gods of Greece: De-severance Heralds the Approach of the Gods,” in *Friedrich A. Kittler: The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 290–303. See additionally Gumbrecht’s interpretation, Gumbrecht, “Media History as the Event of Truth,” 322–323.

- 40 Kittler, “Martin Heidegger, Media, and the Gods of Greece,” 301.
- 41 Gumbrecht, “Media History as the Event of Truth,” 322–323.
- 42 Friedrich A. Kittler, “In the Wake of the *Odyssey*,” in *Friedrich A. Kittler: The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 275–290, here: 289.
- 43 Gumbrecht applies the German translation *Stimmung* for atmosphere or mood because its etymological root word also comprises the German word for voice — *Stimme* — as he is concerned with the bodily and sensual dimensions of sense and world making in literature and beyond. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- 44 Max Bergmann, “How to Live Together with *Her* (2013): Posthuman Forms of Roland Barthes’ *Idiorrhythmy*,” in *Film Criticism* 44.1 (2020), accessed March 05, 2020, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0044.101>>.
- 45 *Her* Screenplay, Spike Jonze, *Austin Film Festival*, October 16, 2015, <<http://austinfilmfestival.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/Her.pdf>>. Film critic Anthony Breznican praised Scarlett Johansson’s acoustic performance “for crafting a playful, fully rounded, down-to-earth character whose core dilemma is the lack of a physical body” and demanded that her role be considered for a Golden Globe nomination (Anthony Breznican, “Golden Globes Rule Out Scarlett Johansson’s *Her* performance,” in *Entertainment Weekly*, November 26, 2013, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://ew.com/article/2013/11/26/golden-globes-scarlett-johansson-her/>).
- 46 Kittler, “Martin Heidegger, Media, and the Gods of Greece,” 301.
- 47 Marie-Luise Angerer proposes that what actually becomes accessible for Theodore is the overcoming of the psychoanalytically posited split within the subject by means of insuring himself of himself through talking, in the hearing of his and *her* voice (Marie-Luise Angerer, “Im Rhythmus der Stimme: Von der (Medien-)Betäubung zur (Auto-)Affizierung am Beispiel von HER,” in *Medien verstehen: Marshall McLuhans Understanding Media*, eds. Till A. Heilmann and Jens Schröter (Lüneburg: meson press, 2017), 151–163, here: 156).
- 48 Kittler, “In the Wake of the *Odyssey*,” 289.
- 49 Gill Partington, “Obituary: ‘Switch Off All Apparatuses’: Friedrich Adolf Kittler, 1943–2011,” in *Radical Philosophy* 172.3/4 (2012), 66–69, here: 69.
- 50 In 1966, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* conducted an interview with Heidegger, at his famous log cabin in Todtnauberg in the Black Forest, with the stipulation that the interview would be published only after his death; the interview was released in 1976. For a comprehensive study of its prehistory, occurrence, and controversy see Lutz Hachmeister, *Heideggers Testament: Der Philosoph, DER SPIEGEL und die SS* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2014).
- 51 Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314.