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## **Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System (review)**

Richard Burket Kielbowicz

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Book Review

# *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*

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***Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*. By Bernhard Siegert**, trans. Kevin Repp. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999. Pp. ix+325. \$55/\$19.95.

Bernhard Siegert's original study convincingly shows how the technologies and institutions of information transmission affected the work of selected European literary figures. But his effort to explain broad shifts in literature by reference to postal epochs lacks sufficient evidence to satisfy most historians of technology. Readers will find brief and familiar discussions of highlights in postal history—franking privileges, cheap uniform postage, stamps, mailboxes, letter carriers, the Universal Postal Union—and Siegert sketches some tantalizing connections between these developments and literature. Yet the causal relationships he notes are often more suggestive than conclusive. He even ranges into telegraphy and digital telephony, though he strains to relate Pulse Code Modulation to literature.

Siegert is at his best in using case studies to show how systems of information relay connected letter writers with authors and authors with audiences. Goethe, for instance, enjoyed a franking privilege that enabled him to exchange messages with correspondents postage free. These private exchanges allowed Goethe to test his writings on small audiences and brought raw material that he worked into published writings. Of course, most authors did not benefit from franking privileges, but even their works exemplified "the seeds of modern authorship, in which books were understood as intimate letters from authors to readers" (p. 26). Another revealing case study examines a letter-writing campaign by Kafka to court his fiancée. Kafka mastered the technical intricacies of the postal system—delivery schedules, railroad transportation logistics, handling procedures, and the like—to orchestrate the flow of his messages with remarkable precision.

Although such case studies clearly document how postal operations affected individual writers, *Relays* falls short of demonstrating the general importance of changes in information relay to literature. Siegert observes in passing, for instance, that some postal innovations deregionalized audiences for novels, but he fails to follow up with details about the extent of the change and its specific consequences. Nowhere does he systematically examine some of the obvious ways that postal technologies and policies tangibly affected literature. For example, constraints on postal transports led in some countries to longstanding policies that kept books out of the mails, one reason that book-length literature appeared in a serialized form. In many sections Siegert appears less interested in dissecting the concrete effects of the postal system than in using the notion of information relay as a metaphor for understanding the transmission of meaning between authors and readers.

The ambiguity, paradoxes, and wordplay that pervade Siegert's literary criticism do not help illuminate issues for historians. One example: "The letter," he writes, "does not just supplement the presence of the voice, it supplements [End Page 563] supplementation itself. But the absence of absence does not allow any signified to arrive" (p. 24). Historians will find that his bibliography provides a helpful selection of German works on the mails and telegraphs, but the lack of an index makes the book difficult to use for specific topics.

At a time when it is fashionable to speculate about the impact of new media on literature, Siegert provides historical grounding for such explorations. His book partly bridges the gulf between literary theory and historical studies. The principal beneficiaries of this effort are likely to be literary theorists who need to learn about the history of the technologies and institutions involved in transmitting information.

*Dr. Kielbowicz* teaches in the School of Communications at the University of Washington and has written about postal systems and early telecommunication.

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