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*Political Theater as Experimental Anthropology:
On a Production of Kleist's
Prinz Friedrich von Homburg**

Alfred Nordmann

For the first time in decades, many German theaters have to fear for their financial security. For a long time this security had been guaranteed by a generous system of federal, state, and municipal subsidies in a tradition that can be traced back to Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller and to the idea of a national theater that transmits cultural values and provides moral edification. An alarming signal was sent by the city of Berlin when it decided not only to cut subsidies but to close the *Schiller Theater* entirely—previously the home of many famous actors, directors, and numerous noteworthy productions. Indeed, its very name tied this theater to the quest for moral edification in which it had engaged almost all too obligingly. Since the decision to close this theater saves the city annual subsidies of roughly 22 million dollars, other cities and state-governments are eager to follow this as a cost-cutting precedent in financially difficult times. Ironically, however, Berlin's decision can be viewed not primarily as a cost-cutting measure but as a prudent attempt to offset the proliferation of state-supported theaters that befell Berlin with the reunification of Germany.¹ Indeed, it was argued that among

* I wish to thank Hartmut Wickert, Jill Frank, Brian Roots, Amittai Aviram, Holly Dixon, and Martin Donougho for their helpful comments.

1. Berlin sustains three opera houses (each receiving subsidies larger than those of the *Schiller Theater*), the *Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz*, the *Deutsches Theater*, the *Volksbühne*, the *Maxim Gorki Theater*, the *Brecht-Theater am Schiffbauerdamm* (formerly the *Berliner Ensemble*), and countless smaller theaters and independent theater groups.

the many Berlin theaters, the *Schiller Theater* had proved least capable of competing artistically against, for example, the former East German *Volksbühne* with its artistic director Frank Castorf. True to its name, the anarchic and triumphant *Volksbühne* could not care less about the historical rationale for state-subsidies. Overtly, at least, it aims to destroy rather than transmit cultural values. Yet its subversive intent does not preclude enormous critical success since Castorf's destruction of literary value releases considerable energy. His productions frequently celebrate the literal dismemberment of classical texts in front of large and youthful audiences. If this shift of subsidies from the *Schiller Theater* to the *Volksbühne* appears paradoxical, the contradiction was heightened in the 1993 yearbook of *Theater heute*. After celebrating the *Volksbühne* as "Theater of the Year," *Theater heute* invited critic Joachim Kaiser to blame Frank Castorf for the sense of crisis and lack of legitimacy which pervades German theaters. The threat to institutional security, Kaiser argues, can be checked by rigorously imposing on theaters the traditional task of providing aesthetic education. Castorf's successful directorial style flagrantly undercuts Kaiser's proposal for the restoration of cultural legitimacy.² Kaiser's argument ignores entirely that subsidies are rarely awarded on the basis of legitimacy. Instead, institutional inertia and the notion that theaters can lend cities an air of cosmopolitan prestige govern the decision-making process. Funding agencies do not distinguish between moral edification and raw entertainment; indeed, some cities pit their theaters against road productions that are bought ready-made as products with a known entertainment value. Nowadays, so-called cultural politics primarily regulates the culture industry.³ It is modeled on business-sponsorship with states and municipalities seeking name-recognition through association with cutting-edge, provocative, and successful theater. This kind of cultural politics undermines the idea of theater as moral edification, fostering the crisis of legitimacy in precisely those institutions it is designed to preserve.

2. "If attending the staging of a classical play has become something of a gamble (with roulette offering far better odds), this has several causes. The main cause is probably that, since the sixties, German theater has been living beyond its means in a free-spirited, ambitious, and well-subsidized manner as if intoxicated by all that it self-righteously deems itself capable of." Joachim Kaiser, "So drohen gewisse Kunstarten auszusterben," *Theater 1993*, yearbook of *Theater heute* 34 (1993): 94.

3. Non-German audiences may have noticed this shift of cultural politics in the wake of the demise of the "New German Cinema."

In this situation, German directors confront the problem of how the theater can still be political at all. Advocating the theater as an institution for moral development is easily exposed as anachronistic or even pathetic when it has to compete with other buyers and sellers in the marketplace of ideas. At this juncture, the problem described ceases to be particular to Germany, but holds true for the so-called postmodern condition. It arises in all countries which are saturated by a seductive flow of information, images, and opinions, and in which current events drown out historical perspective. It arises in all societies that are simultaneously atomized and homogeneous, atomized in that they are a mere conglomerate of individuals, homogeneous in that these atomized individual citizens live in cities that look increasingly similar, consume the same goods, and receive the same images and news. The question of how the theater still can be political is thus tantamount to the question of how performances can acknowledge the postmodern condition without succumbing to it.⁴

Responses to this problem are developed by Frank Castorf, Heiner Müller, George Tabori, and lesser known German directors like Andreas Kriegenburg, Christoph Marthaler, or Hartmut Wickert. Wickert's conception of politics, for example, sets his theater apart from the theater of the 1960s and 1970s when, as one might say in retrospect, politics came easy.⁵ His analytic and speculative stance focuses on the stage as an anthropological laboratory in which experiments on human sociability, subjectivity, and agency are conducted. To be sure, one can argue that the stage is always a space in which conceptions of human nature are acted out and put on display.⁶ However, this implicit condition is only

4. This very loose characterization of the "postmodern condition" does not derive from postmodern theory (if there is such a thing) but borrows from descriptions by Barthes, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Virilio, and Luhmann.

5. Since Hartmut Wickert elaborated the particular type of theatrical investigation described here, he should be acknowledged as a co-author of this article. I have served as his dramaturg for altogether twelve productions so far. From 1984 to 1988, Wickert was artistic director of the small *Tübinger Zimmertheater*, then becoming director in residence at the *Stadtheater Konstanz*. He is currently director in residence at the *Niedersächsisches Staatstheater* in Hannover.

6. See Natalie Crohn-Schmitt, *Actors and Onlookers: Theater and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1990). Crohn-Schmitt explores analogies between scientists' implicit concepts of nature and the equally implicit theatrical concepts of nature as expressed by Stanislavski, the Wooster Group, etc. A narrowed focus on conceptions of human nature (as including agency, subjectivity, etc.) allows for a more direct treatment: the rehearsal process is always overtly a means of constructing a character under some conception of human nature. It is anthropology in action and requires no comparison to particular theories of human nature which may or may not have currency at the time.

rarely taken as an explicit point of departure. Rarely is the situation for the actor, who is asked to create a character and establish relations to other characters, taken as a political resource, namely as an opportunity to investigate, forge, and display a model of agency and interaction.⁷

In 1774, the German physicist and philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg traveled to London, visited the theater, and reported what he had seen in a series of letters published as *Theater Letters from England*. At the heart of these letters is Lichtenberg's call for a more realistic acting-style in Germany. Actors, Lichtenberg argues, ought to be careful observers of human beings, students of human nature who do not draw on their own psychological states but construct a fabric of feelings and beliefs which characterize agents in particular social and historical configurations:

I should think that the lawyer, the barkeeper, the merchant, the store-keeper, the barber, the clerk, the small-town consul all have their own national economy, their own principles of good taste, their own science of physiognomy, and yes, their own astronomy.⁸

Hartmut Wickert's 1992 production of Heinrich von Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* provides a recent exemplification of Lichtenberg's anthropological agenda.⁹ The idiosyncracies of this staging are foregrounded against the performance history of the play.

While Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theater" is read the world over, outside the German-speaking theater few are familiar with his last play, *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, which originated at about the same time as the essay (1810/11).¹⁰ It is a peculiar play in that, although not written as a formal experiment of any kind, it reads like a succession of four distinct plays.

The play opens with a sleepwalking scene, set on the eve of a decisive battle. Though considered unreliable, having botched up previous

7. See Alfred Nordmann, "The Actors' Brief: Experiences with Chekhov," *Theatre Research International* 19 (1994): 134-42.

8. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, "Briefe aus England," *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. III, ed. Wolfgang Promies (Munich: Hanser, 1972) 345.

9. The term "anthropological" here refers to philosophical anthropology: theories of human nature derived from principled considerations of human agency, responsibility, subjectivity, and language.

10. While there are numerous English translations of the play, the first English production did not take place until 1976 at the Royal Exchange in Manchester with Tom Courtenay as the Prince. Further references to the play will indicate parenthetically act and scene and refer to Heinrich von Kleist, *Prince Friedrich of Hamburg*, trans. Diana Stone Peters and Frederick G. Peters (New York: New Directions, 1978).

battles, the Prince of Homburg is supposed to lead the cavalry. Presently, however, he is winding a laurel wreath while sleepwalking. The Elector and the court, including Princess Natalia, appear in the garden and engage the sleepwalker in a game. They take the laurel wreath and stage a coronation-scene, with Natalia preparing to place the wreath on his head. Still sleepwalking, the Prince expresses his delight, prompting the court to withdraw hurriedly. As everyone disappears, the Prince catches a glove from Natalia's hand. Upon awakening, he remembers the entire scene as a dream of love and glory to be gained in the upcoming battle. At the same time, he has the glove, for him most marvelous testimony to the truth and reality of his dream.

The play now shifts, becoming an action-oriented battle drama. Orders for the battle are issued; the cavalry is to wait until the Prince receives specific instructions. Combat ensues and shouts of victory are heard even before the Prince is called upon to intervene. This development does not agree with the Prince's vision of proving himself a hero in this battle. Disregarding orders, he thrusts himself into the fight. Indeed, he does gain a victory for his side, although more might have been achieved had he awaited his orders. While the battle brought victory over the enemy, this victory fell short of the original goal of complete annihilation.

The play shifts gears again. It now becomes a dramatic discourse on principles of law, government, and duty. The Elector simultaneously hails the proud Prince for his heroic effort and condemns him to die for disobeying orders. The Prince literally cannot believe this sentence. He is aghast and bewildered, yet utterly confident that he will be restored to his former duties. Only when he sees the grave already prepared for his corpse, does he break down, sobbing fearfully and begging for mercy. Witnessing his pathetic pleas, the Elector agrees to pardon the Prince, provided that he insists on his innocence and openly claims that he was wrongly sentenced. This, of course, the Prince cannot do, yet the Elector's offer provides him another shot at immortality. Having failed to gain it through heroics on the battlefield, he grasps his opportunity to place the principles of law and duty above his own life, gladly and symbolically accepting the death penalty for his offence. All of this is accompanied by long discourses on the relative merits of obedience to the law and passionate engagement in affairs of the state.

As the Prince comes forward declaring his own martyrdom on the altar of military law, the play moves to a final dream state. The Prince's

sacrificial surrender inspires the Elector and the Prince's military peers to stage a mock execution. As his blindfold is removed, he beholds Natalia placing the wreath on his head: "Is this a dream?" he asks incredulously and receives the answer, "A dream, what else." A series of hails to the Prince finally culminates in the rallying cry, "Into the dust with all the enemies of Brandenburg!" (V.11).

The play's political character is fairly obvious, as is the strange mixture of dream-play, grand historical drama, philosophical treatise, and heroic fantasy. However, there is not and there never was a straightforward way to adopt Kleist's dramatic and political impulse. *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* always required heavy editing in order to serve as a political morality play. Written at the time of the Napoleonic wars, it is clear who the play targets as "the enemies of Brandenburg." And since Kleist was a former Prussian soldier who, like the Prince of Homburg, had fallen from grace and who was continually seeking a spiritual and political home, it is also clear that Kleist wanted to endear himself to the court with the concluding patriotic battle cry. But the court failed to be impressed by a play which featured as its hero a Prussian officer scared to death and begging for dear life at the play's crucial turning-point. Indeed, the play was not performed until 1821 in Vienna and saw only a few productions in the nineteenth century which usually sought to eliminate or soften the impact of the Prince's "embarrassing display of cowardice."¹¹

After the two world wars, a rather different obstacle presented itself. A play that culminates in the desire to conquer the world, to abandon — literally and metaphorically — all boundaries between self and others, and to infuse the world with a German sense of community could hardly serve as a straightforward morality play, no matter how well it frames the basic issue of emotional engagement versus strict lawfulness in affairs of the state. The ending of the play now posed a similar problem as the ending of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*: any staging appeared to require the adoption of a stance vis-à-vis the ending, countering its inherent threat of embarrassment.

11. According to a report by Max Grube, Emperor Wilhelm II expressed a liking for the play. As one of his aides interjected, "If only it weren't for that unfortunate cowardice-scene," the Kaiser assured him that this scene can be cut, after all. See Heinrich von Kleist, *Heinrich von Kleist: Prinz Friedrich von Homburg — Erläuterungen und Dokumente*, ed. Fritz Hackert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979) 141.

A good number of interesting, beautiful, and successful productions developed such a stance. For example, the play was treated as an autobiographical study with the Prince representing Kleist's own attempt to inspire poetically a rigidly organized military society. It was shown how his attempt was doomed to fail, and the final battle cry became a sign of this failure, demonstrating how the military machine marches on as it leaves the limp body of the poet behind.¹² In other productions, the play was treated as a vehicle to exemplify the beautiful and dangerous proximity of Romanticism and fascism.¹³ It was also used to portray a generational conflict with the unruly poetic youth insisting on an authentic life, longing to be a hero but finding his heroic conduct denied, longing for his own death as a symbolic self-sacrifice and finding his execution denied, therefore moaning at the end in frustration and pain as the others hail him as hero.¹⁴ Other productions simply decided to downplay the militaristic ending, instead strengthening either the enlightened humanism of the Elector, or the structural analogies to other plays by Kleist or to his essay on the marionette theater.¹⁵

In all these cases, the staging involved a thesis about the play and contained a message about the ending that rendered the play interesting as a basis for analogy, inference, or commentary. In all instances, the thesis or the story marked a distance from the ending, reassuring the audience and ensuring that no one could mistake the staging for a tacit endorsement of the nationalist — perhaps even fascist — slogan. It tried to set the record straight and salvage Kleist from unfortunate political alliances. Indeed, political theater and political conscience seemed to require just that a stance be assumed, or a gesture, even a comment, made.

How meaningful are such gestures, opinions, historical theses, and declarations of allegiance under the postmodern condition? How political are they in an age characterized by the subversion of political stances, that is, by the accommodation of any and all opinions as equally meaningful or meaningless private gestures? When grand historical narratives have become dislodged by the multitude of possible narratives, who

12. Peter Stein's 1972 production at the *Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer*.

13. At least some interpreted this as the political dimension of Jean Vilar's famous 1951 production in Avignon and Paris. See Hackert 158.

14. Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff's production at the *Schauspielhaus Hamburg* in 1984.

15. For the first approach, see Hans Lietzau's 1972 production at the now defunct *Schiller Theater* in Berlin; for the second, see Adolf Dresen's 1984 production in Vienna.

needs to know that the actors at the *Stadttheater Konstanz* are antifascist at heart? Indeed, isn't there something pathetic about a compulsive desire to show one's true colors and allegiances especially when these reflect only a mainstream mentality? This barrage of questions indicates that a particular conception of the political has dissolved along with the privileged authorial voice and the moral authority of author or artist. If the performance no longer credibly serves as a medium for a political message, this is perhaps because the political resides no longer in the content or meaning of messages but rather in the performance itself. Today, politics is not the subject of communication but somehow built into the problem and process of communication.

While the vagueness of these formulations indicates the difficulty of a political theater today, it also provides a cue for Wickert's production of Kleist's play. The postmodern condition leaves human subjects exposed to a multitude of soundbites, facts, data, opinions, and fragments from which these subjects have to carve a conception of the world and of their position in the world: a world history and a life history have to be forged simultaneously. Everyone is permanently engaged in this precarious project. Complicating matters is the tempting and seductive availability of a multitude of prefabricated narratives, stories that serve to reduce confusion and complexity and that promise a cathartic emergence of order and simplicity.

The theater may prove to be one of the few remaining public spaces that can resist or impede this desire for unity and order, for premature or illusory closure. As Wickert put it: "The theater must become even more difficult. . . . We must learn to share with the audience the fear of being at a loss, of appearing dumb." The theater, Wickert adds, can "aid orientation by providing strategies of disorientation," it can draw audience and actors together by allowing them to share a sense of wonder, to share a sense of the different ways in which human beings can define themselves and their relations to one another.¹⁶ Every play, contemporary or classical, offers a particular conception of human agency and sociability. Wickert's production sought out Kleist's conception neither to communicate it nor to offer it as an interpretive key to the play's hidden meanings. Instead, Kleist's conception of human agency was appropriated as a *theory of acting*. It comes to life insofar as it drives the

16. Playbill for Thornton Wilder's *Wir sind noch einmal davongekommen* [*The Skin of our Teeth*] (Konstanz: Stadttheater, 1992/93) 1: 22, 12, and 16.

acting processes in the play's staging, and it thus renders the theater a space for difference.¹⁷ The appropriation of theories of acting is political not only in the vague sense in which any intimation of difference questions the way things are. It is also political in that it inaugurates a specific process of remembering, of valuing the otherness of the persons and events on stage. Following Walter Benjamin, one might say that stories promote forgetfulness rather than remembrance, that is, that the very compactness which renders them supposedly memorable violates the dignity of the individual whose otherness is subsumed into the storyline.¹⁸ Wickert's style of work restores dignity and otherness by clothing the performance into a foreign but germane conception of human agency. He thus ends up refusing to communicate with the audience along some storyline. Instead, the audience witnesses the formation and differentiation of actions and feelings and thereby the invention of the very conventions ordinarily presupposed by stories. As a witness to such processes, the audience experiences disorientation and disintegration as a group. In a successful performance, the audience reconstitutes itself as it gradually recovers a foreign conception of meaningful action. Wickert's theater does not step into the public sphere but aims to create it, engaging the audience in the reformation of a public.

Kommerell's observation that the characters in Kleist's works are riddles and become riddles to themselves was Wickert's point of departure.¹⁹ In his essay on the marionette theater, Kleist views the dawning of consciousness and self-awareness as initiating a fall from grace in which humans become inscrutable to themselves. Accordingly, the image not of "fallen man" but of the fall itself is central in Kleist's works. The motion of falling from grace continues until one falls into a felicitous configuration, finding oneself locked into a more

17. Accordingly, Wickert's approach yields radically different stagings as it encounters different authors and texts. His systematic style of work does not yield an easily identifiable performance style. See Nordmann "The Actors' Brief" as well as Hartmut Wickert and Alfred Nordmann, "Shamanism Vilified and Redeemed: Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*," *LMDA Review* [Newsletter of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America] 5.3 (1994): 1-5 and 6.1 (1994): 3-5. A more extended version is forthcoming in *Contemporary Theater Review*.

18. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 83-109.

19. Max Kommerell, *Geist und Buchstabe der Dichtung: Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Hölderlin*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1944) 245f., 251ff., and 278ff. See also Hermann Reske, *Traum und Wirklichkeit im Werk Heinrich von Kleists* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969) 90-106.

or less firm and durable social constellation. The meeting of glances, the overpowering intrusion of a visual image, and the communality of purpose are all sources of stability and rest, of momentary respite from a free, reckless, and unsupported fall.²⁰ Pondering an arched doorway, Kleist wonders why the stones stay in place even though there is nothing to support them. The doorway stands, Kleist reasons, "because all the stones want to crash down at once,"²¹ yet each impedes the fall of the other, thus giving rise to a harmonious and beautiful structure. This image of a communal desire, indeed a death-wish, as a source of temporary stability serves as a model for what Kleist calls community [*Gemeinschaft*] rather than society [*Gesellschaft*]. Kleist's mode of life was thus to thrust himself into the abyss of death, all the time hoping he might fall into a communal constellation of mutual support. He expresses his friendship by way of enjoining the other: "Come, let us do some good and die as we do it, die one of the millions of deaths that we have died already and will yet die."²² Eleven days before he and Henriette von Vogel committed suicide, he writes that "all my jubilant worry must be to find an abyss deep enough for me and her to thrust ourselves into."²³

While consciousness first effected the fall from grace by leaving human beings awkwardly self-conscious, it does nothing to guide them in their fall. Even language does not provide a stable vantage-point from which to judge, as it too is caught up in the erratic movement of the subject. Language is incapable of expressing an essential nature because "it cannot paint the soul and what it gives us are only

20. This description of Kleist's anthropology and political theory draws not only on Kleist's plays and his essay "On the Marionette Theater," but also on his letters and stories like "The Marquise of O," "The Foundling," "The Earthquake in Chile," "The Duel"; and on his political tracts like "What is at stake in this war?" and "On the rescue of Austria;" and on his poem "To Queen Luise of Prussia." Aside from Kommerell, the most influential commentator was Alexander Kluge, "Die Differenz. Heinrich von Kleist," *Theodor Fontane, Heinrich von Kleist und Anna Wilde* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1987) 73-89. See also Karl-Heinz Bohrer, "Augenblicke emphase und Selbstmord: Zum Plötzlichkeitsmotiv bei Heinrich von Kleist," *Plötzlichkeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); and Mathieu Carrière's *Für eine Literatur des Krieges, Kleist* (Basel: Roter Stern, 1984).

21. Heinrich von Kleist, "To Wilhelmine von Zenge," 16 Nov. 1800, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II (Munich: Hanser, 1965) 593 (with a drawing on 598).

22. Kleist, "To Otto August Rühle von Lilienstem," 31 Aug. 1806, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II, 768

23. Kleist, "To Marie von Kleist," 19 Nov. 1811, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II 2, 885.

tattered fragments."²⁴ Ideas emerge as words fall under great pressure into particular syntactic configurations.²⁵

Even in their bare sketchiness, Kleist's views on human motion, language, and destiny yield a philosophical anthropology.²⁶ The coherence of these views, their tight metaphorical connectedness throughout his works, renders them a compelling conception of life, of individual and social agency. Hartmut Wickert accordingly set out to enact this peculiar form of life, to attempt a careful and tentative reconstruction.

The Konstanz production therefore amplified those features of the play which relate to Kleist's anthropology. They range from explicitly thematic aspects to the use of imagery, from the structure of argument to the secrets of syntax. It is impossible to detail and discuss the various manifestations of this anthropological dimension in the staging. An incomplete and cursory survey will have to suffice. It begins with the discovery of an explicitly anthropological topos in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. When the Elector performs an experiment on the sleepwalking Prince, he is indeed a Prometheus who creates a new, heroic, and poetic human being. The Prince eagerly embraces the possibilities suggested to him, but the playful anthropological experiment also figures prominently in the Elector's vision of things to come. It directs the charismatic aura of the Prince towards the creation of a military community which bonds with somnambulant confidence and which can deliver the

24. Kleist, "To Ulrike von Kleist," 1 Feb. 1801, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II, 626. At best, language runs, like a spare wheel, parallel to the workings of the mind.

25. Compare with Kleist's essay, "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts in the Course of Speaking."

26. Kleist's defining philosophical moment was the so-called Kant crisis of 1801. A vivid description of the devastating impact of Kant's thought can be found in one of Kleist's letter to his fiancée. See Kleist, "To Wilhelmine von Zenge," 22 March 1801, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II, 634. Since Kleist had previously been exposed to Kantian philosophy, it is difficult to imagine that this crisis would have revolved solely around the fairly elementary Kantian point about the unknowability of things in themselves (as described by Kleist with the famous metaphor of the green glasses through which we see the world, which we cannot take off, and which forever prevent us from judging whether the world truly is green). From his contemporaneous letters to his sister, the Kant crisis appears as the further realization that the self is inscrutable to itself, that it can also be known as an appearance only, i.e., as seen through green glasses. Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. II, 768, 600-03, 626-30, 636. Given this perspective, language cannot be viewed as a means of self-expression. Kleist's writing stands under the spell of this disturbing insight, which may well have rendered him suicidal in 1801. See Helmut Arntzen, "Heinrich von Kleist: Gewalt und Sprache," *Die Gegenwartigkeit Kleists*, ed. Wieland Schmidt (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1980) 62-78.

complete annihilation of the enemy. The Elector thus emerges neither as authoritarian ruler nor as humanistic patriarch. The Prince and he are engaged in a common, albeit precarious and delicate enterprise, working from different directions towards one another.

Kleist's falling motion sets in with the fall from sleep to wakefulness and continues for the entire duration of the play, involving not just the Prince but the whole cast of characters. The entire performance extends for ninety minutes a particular state of consciousness which in the daily experience of most people lasts only for a moment. In the moment of awakening, we fall out of our dreams as light and imagery invade our sleep. We find ourselves sorting sounds and images, distinguishing the real from the imaginary, and defining ourselves as separate entities in the world. Often enough, mundane and simple questions capture the sense of wonder and puzzlement at this juncture: is this annoying buzz part of the dream or is it the outside world breaking in; moreover, on which side of this divide do the body and mind of the dreamer belong? There is thus a very definite activity that occurs in the moment of awakening, and this activity defines a manner of acting.²⁷ Instead of sleepwalking in a vaguely dreamlike manner, the actors performed this activity by developing a great readiness to be overwhelmed by powerful imagery, especially by intensely focusing on the origin, history, familiarity, and significance of objects (such as the glove), of social configurations (such as a military briefing), of physical appearances (relating their own posture to the projected image of a heroic nineteenth-century sculpture), of words, even their own words (that is, by speaking not in order to purposefully express a thought but as if picking prefabricated images and sounds from a visual and auditory space that surrounds the speaker). Accordingly, the predominant mood was one of intense stillness and concentration, occasional jerks prompted only by overwhelming moments of surprise.

Instead of the classical opposition between Elector and Prince, the audience witnessed a hermetic and homogeneous world of interactions that

27. As part of the rehearsal process, the actors were confronted with analytic descriptions of this activity by philosophers like Henri Bergson and Ludwig Klages, and by novelist Ernst Jünger who relates it specifically to the art of warfare. The director and dramaturg attended a seminar held at the University of Konstanz by Axel Honneth. It investigated the prominence accorded to states of diminished awareness in the political theory of Walter Benjamin. Honneth and members of the seminar visited rehearsals and discussed with the cast the similarities of Benjamin's and Kleist's treatment of states of diminished awareness.

were neither martial nor dreamlike in character. It was confronted with a community trying to configure itself, trying to fall into a felicitous constellation that would make communal action possible. In this case, the desired communal end was to be the complete annihilation of the enemy; in a manner of speaking, the entire performance fell towards that last line which was whispered by the whole group like a grand spell that is finally remembered: "Into the dust with all the enemies of Brandenburg!" Questionable as its content may be, the arrival at this point marks an achievement in the search for community. The Prince and his peers have reached a form of togetherness that transcends a verbal, contractual, or legal consensus. They are now ready to overpower by military means all national boundaries because they accomplished the removal of all boundaries between their individual selves.²⁸ For a moment, however brief, they exist as a community or family. Indeed, as the lights dimmed at the conclusion of the play, there rippled through the group a startled awakening and the imminent disintegration of this brief moment, a sense of wonder or shock that their vision of community has proved to be so martial.

There was a movement of falling not only into a social configuration and toward the final line of the play, but also into and out of patterns of speech. The characters define themselves and others by falling into an enthusiastically rising three step, the Prince overstepping his bounds in the sleepwalking scene by referring to the Elector as "Friedrich! My Prince! My Father!" and to Natalia as "Natalia! My darling! My bride!" (I.1). As the characters become riddles to themselves and thus able to reconfigure their community, the Prince becomes "My son! My dearest friend! What can I call you now?" (V.7). And immediately before the closing line stands the communal three step: "Into the field! Into the field! To the battle! On to victory! On to victory!" (V.11). But speakers not only fall into syntactic patterns that carry them across social boundaries, they also fall out of patterns. When Major Kottwitz delivers a lengthy speech defending the

28. Cf. the Prince's great speech of self-sacrifice in which he enjoins the Elector to "conquer the entire world if it defies you" (V.7). In his last monologue, the Prince anticipates his own death as a way of transcendent overcoming of the world and merging with the sun: "Now, immortality, you are totally mine! You are streaming toward me with the radiance of a thousand suns through the blindfold on my eyes . . . all of life is sinking away from me in twilight. I can still perceive colors and shapes, but everything beneath me is lying in a mist" (V.10). Compare this to Kleist's vision of the community for which the Napoleonic wars are to be fought, namely one that defies all borders and boundaries and "which cannot even conceive of its glory without conceiving the glory and simultaneously the salvation of all others that populate the earth." Hecket 70.

Prince, he begins by pleading that it is in the state's interest to forgive the Prince's disobedience, only to discover in the course of his speech that he himself would gladly accept death for such disobedience. As Kottwitz's argument derails, it transports him not towards a conclusion but towards a sense of wonder at himself. After a forceful beginning which is directed against the Elector, his speech drifts off into an inaudible reverie (V.5).

The falling motion of the actors was supported in various ways by Thomas Dreißigacker's set. The stage resembled the inside of a camera. In agreement with Kleist's script, night would prevail in this dark and somber space, light falling in from the outside, freezing and fixing particular images. Projected from behind onto a muted screen were photographs of a martial sculpture, perhaps an ossified dream-image that is to be remembered, scrutinized, revitalized, and drawn upon in the light of day. In relation to these overpowering images and their promise of grandeur, the actors seemed dwarfed, indeed, challenged to relate their characters to the idols and ideals that invaded their space.²⁹ In front of the screen, the actors moved on an incline which rendered any attempt to cross the stage from left to right as a falling motion. The incline also allowed one scene to swiftly fall into the next and towards the notorious end: while the prevailing mood was marked by wonder, strangely somber and quiet, the pace of the performance was swift, as new situations established themselves in a downward motion from the top left, even while the previous situation was dissolving on the bottom right.

Wickert's decision to present a strange and hermetic world that is modeled

29. In the play, the Prince is twice related to pre-existing images. As he winds his wreath, one of the observers suggests that in his dream the Prince is emulating certain paintings. And when the Elector has him arrested, the Prince compares this gesture to a drawing of chalk on canvas which invokes the story of Brutus: "If he can now approach me only like a rigid figure from antiquity, I am sorry for him and he has earned my pity" (II.10). The reference to a chalk drawing is generally interpreted as an allusion to a portrait of Goethe. An alternative interpretation might run as follows: the critical reference to Brutus is directed at France and the French revolution, which had idolized Brutus's sacrifice as a revolutionary virtue. The painting in question may therefore be a composite of David's most famous revolutionary neoclassical paintings: his depiction of Brutus, the oath of the Horatians, and the chalk drawing of the revolutionary oath. All three were exhibited side by side in 1791; Kleist himself visited Paris during the revolutionary festivities on 14 July 1801. While these festivities strengthened his francophobia, I was unable to ascertain whether at this time the three paintings were still or again exhibited together. This interpretation bears interestingly on Wickert's and Dreißigacker's conception of overpowering images invading political space: after David had painted the oath of the Horatians, the revolutionary delegates decided to emulate the pose in that painting for their own revolutionary oath — and then asked David to paint this emulation of a pose of his own invention.

on a precarious state of consciousness carried with it a number of risks. Most importantly, the spoken text was not always considered a means of communication among the characters and never as a means of communication with the audience. When Major Kottwitz drifts off into puzzled self-reflection, his words gradually lose their character as forceful argument to be followed and shared by others. Instead, the previously linear speech begins to convey only fragmented images, then disintegrates further into a mere space of otherwise inaudible and incomprehensible sound, and finally leaves the audience with the mere image of a man mouthing words to create a dream of himself. Only the image and its intensity matters here, not the intelligibility of the particular words. However, an audience that is accustomed to “understand” the performance of a play by coordinating verbal messages within a general framework of meaning becomes easily frustrated by the decision to abandon the intelligibility of thoughts and to show only how thoughts happen to engross a character.³⁰ In the case at hand, the audience in Konstanz proved remarkably indulgent and quite receptive to the quiet, almost forbidding intensity of the endeavour on stage. But the strain was also on the actors. If a production depends entirely on all actors’ maintaining a state of total receptivity towards one another, always alert to images and impressions that might invade and overwhelm them, the quality of the performance is prone to vary considerably from day to day.³¹ Indeed, the strangeness of

30. In this regard, the theater works against the grain of an overly educated, logocentric audience. While actors and directors literally try to unlearn what they know of a canonized play in order to appropriate it afresh for the contemporary stage, the audience, including professional critics, maintains its identity by insisting upon antecedent expectations. Following Wickert, a virtue of the theater might be that knowledge of the written text prepares in no way for the experience of going to the theater. Attending a staging should be a gamble in the best and most adventurous sense of that term. By the same token, an overly educated audience tends to “read” productions in a conventional manner. For instance, the employment of projected images as part of the set was read by some as a means of illustrating or commenting upon the action on stage (i.e., as something that has been known and practised for the purposes of political theater ever since Piscator). This “reading” overlooks the various ways in which the characters on stage see these images and physically relate to them. See, for example, Gerhard Mack’s review in *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 13 Feb. 1992.

31. Even with an established company of actors that has worked for several years with Hartmut Wickert, eight weeks of rehearsals were barely enough to first learn and then unlearn the stage conventions and indispensable agreements on blocking. After all, the actors were not to focus on a sequence of agreements but to enter this hermetic world with a sense of blind trust, as if abandoning themselves to a situation in which anything can happen and where the action of the others (though agreed upon and always the same) becomes a source of constant surprise. Productions like these are the best argument for the creation of repertory theaters with permanent companies and extended rehearsal periods.

the world created on stage issues from a form of blocking which undercuts the notion of deliberately coordinated action, which suggests that everything is adrift, almost haphazard. In this world, individual difference is not determined by place, rank, or mode of expression, but by the intangible sensory bonds among characters. The Elector and the Prince are distinguished by the scope of their sensitivity and circumspection, by the strength and security of their feeling for one another and everyone else.³²

By extricating itself from familiar standards of purposive motion and interaction and by enacting a remote and alien form of life, the production distanced itself from the conception of the theater as an institution for moral edification. Wickert's staging was not concerned with cultural values, ideology, or opinion; nor did it offer itself as a basis of inference or as a display from which lessons could be drawn or analogies established for the purposes of aesthetic education. This aspect of the production was understood and criticized by Gerhard Mack:

Hartmut Wickert and his dramaturg Alfred Nordmann did not wish to show once again an aspect of the conflict of alienation. . . . The problematics of modernity presupposes subjects and the possibility of action, and both must appear to them as a reminiscence of their youth when they were still playing soccer in their backyards. Today the key words are structure and function, and in the pingpong between structure and function it was first Dürrenmatt and then postmodernity that relieved the individual of responsibility. Wickert is therefore interested in the images that set a society into motion. And with Kleist, dream is the instrument for seeing these images. . . . One asks oneself who that supreme intelligent being might be who pulls the strings in all these reveries. For even today, power isn't exerted quite so entirely without a subject.³³

This critic demands for the stage a conception of human agency which shows the mediation of interests and intentions as they are expressed by and impact on individual subjects. It is on this conception, too, that the theater itself may be considered an intentional agent in political discourse,

32. When the Prince is asked why he trusts that the Elector will not sentence him to death, he responds that his trust is based "on my sense of him" (III.1). Accordingly, the play can be read as a disintegration and subsequent re-constitution of this secure sensory bond. To fall from grace is here to fall into an excentric state at a remove from the emotional core of a community.

33. Gerhard Mack, *Stuttgarter Zeitung* 13 Feb. 1992. While this review strikes a very critical tone, it also appreciates the "courageous concept." For rather more enthusiastic reviews see the *Konstanz Südkurier* 7 Feb. 1992, the *Schwäbische Zeitung* 7 Feb. 1992, and the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* 8 February 1992.

an agent taking a stance, expressing a point. To understand a performance of Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* would thus consist in recovering what might have been the intentions of its authors (Kleist, Wickert, Dreißigacker, Nordmann, and the ensemble of actors), the performance itself being a medium, something that stands between authors and audience.³⁴ As a moral institution, theater is legitimized if and when a meaningful message can be recovered for the purposes of moral edification.

This instrumental conception of performance as communication has outlived itself. As indicated above, the expression of opinion, the communication of value, and the adoption of a stance have been deprived of political or historical significance. Against the conception of performance as communication and against the broader notion that performances serve as means towards ends, the Konstanz production of *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* stands as a hermetic artifact or multidimensional "thing."³⁵ The performance is an unmediated hermetic "other," enacting a conception of agency, subjectivity, and human interaction, there to be watched like a wondrously beautiful object that gently imposes itself on this world, upon a mode of perception entirely untrained for it. This otherworldliness of the performance is not shocking, alienating, visionary, or utopian. The audience is gently confronted with the task of coming to terms with this strange object as with any other foreign idea or culture one is trying to befriend.

If performance cannot be conceived as (political) communication, it can instead be conceived as a (political) form of remembering. Intensely devoted to the esoteric or hermetic science of enacting a conception of human nature, this kind of theater performs resistance against a conventional narrative which packages events for quick and forgetful consumption. This resistance against subsumption under a storyline dignifies the particular or the individual, restores it to memory, and allows for it to play itself out in a historical process. Also, after a process of unlearning, dissociation, and dismemberment, actors and spectators are joined in the task of remembering or befriending what appears as a hermetically sealed and inaccessible otherness. After the current conventions of how

34. Recovering the intentions of authors has to be distinguished from recovering the intent of the staging or of the acting. Only the former considers the performance as a medium of communication or as a means towards an end. For this distinction, see Nordmann, "The Actors' Brief."

35. This appeal to the notion of a "thing" is indebted to Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (New York: Grove, 1966).

to read a performance bounce off, fractured, from the performance as a mere unmediated thing, the audience has to *remember* itself as a group. Once the reliance on the ordinary tools of the individual consumer and interpreter is frustrated, the individuals in the audience have the opportunity to reconstitute themselves as parts of a critical public.

The legitimacy of the theater therefore does not reside in the recovery of meaning for the purposes of moral edification. Instead, it arises in the constitution of a historical subject from a conglomerate of mere individuals and from the constitution of a structured experience from the unstructured flow of current events.³⁶ Acknowledging the postmodern condition, this kind of theater does not therefore succumb to it, nor does it simply surrender the Enlightenment ideals of agency and subjectivity.

36. With Benjamin one might say that after the death of the narrator, it is perhaps this kind of theater which can still provide not just the small currency of the mere event [*Erlebnis*], but an opportunity for experience [*Erfahrung*] as a patterning of the self within a historical and cultural horizon. See Benjamin, "The Storyteller" but also "Einführung und Armut," *Sprache und Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992) 134-40.