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Humanity's Imaginary Body

The Concepts of Empathy and Sympathy and the New Theater Experience in the 18th Century

In the mid-18th century, a new concept of the theater emerged that became known under the formula (coined by Denis Diderot in 1758) of the “fourth wall”. Its distinctive trait was the separation of stage and audience. Whereas previous forms of theater, whether of a popular, religious or court provenance, had always relied on some kind of physical interaction between actors and spectators, any such direct interaction was now banned. The actors were to play as if there were no audience; “play as if the curtain were not drawn,” Diderot writes.¹ Correspondingly, the spectators were to disregard the actors’ physical presence and become absorbed in the world of the scenic illusion. In other words, actors and audience were to suppress the consciousness of what they were doing – acting and watching. Taken in its full theoretical consequence, this was a theater against the very nature of theater, an anti-theatrical theater so to speak that suspended the most basic condition of any theatrical representation, assembling audience and actors in one room at the same time.² The imaginary fourth wall, on the one hand, enclosed the actors within the fictional world they represented, using their ‘real’ bodies as a medium for their respective roles, and, on the other hand, encouraged the spectators to negate their own physical presence as they became increasingly immersed in the fictional world represented on stage.³

¹ Denis Diderot, *De la poésie dramatique* (1758): “Soit donc que vous composiez, soit que vous jouiez, ne pensez non plus au spectateur que s’il n’existait pas. Imaginez, sur le bord du théâtre, un grand mur qui vous sépare du parterre; jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas,” In: *Œuvres esthétiques*, Paris 1988, p. 231. For Diderot in German, see the contemporary translation by Lessing of his relevant writings: *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, ed. Klaus-Detlev Müller, Stuttgart 1986; here p. 340 (“Man denke also, sowohl während dem Schreiben als während dem Spielen, an den Zuschauer ebenso wenig, als ob gar keiner da wäre. Man stelle sich an dem äußersten Rande der Bühne eine große Mauer vor, durch die das Parterre [sic] abgesondert wird. Man spiele, als ob der Vorhang nicht aufgezogen würde.“)

² Christopher Wild, *Theater der Keuschheit, Keuschheit des Theaters. Zu einer Geschichte der (Anti-)Theatralität von Gryphius bis Kleist*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2003.

³ For the general concept, with particular respect to Diderot’s writings on the arts, cf. the seminal study by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1980. – The standard study for the German historical context is: Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters. Eine Einführung*, vol. 2: *Vom „künstlichen“ zum „natürlichen“ Zeichen. Theater des Barock und der Aufklärung*, Tübingen 1983. With focus on the French context: Wolfgang Orlich, „Realismus der Illusion – Illusion des Realismus“. Bemerkungen zur Theaterpraxis und Dramentheorie in der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts,“ *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 8 (1984), pp. 431-447. – Recent studies on the topic include: Johannes Friedrich Lehmann, *Der Blick durch die Wand. Zur Geschichte des Theaterzuschauers und des*

The fourth wall, then, cuts through the physical reality of the here and now of the theater space and event in order to create another reality: actors and spectators, separated from each other as well as removed from their respective bodies, come together in an imaginary beyond. They move out of their normal space and time into an incorporeal, or spiritual, existence. This is in no way an easy transition. In a stunning and, at first glance, enigmatic phrase from his seminal essay *De la poésie dramatique* (1758), Diderot compares the spectators' experience to that of an earthquake ("as if they felt the earth trembling underneath them").⁴ The comparison, which has gone largely unnoticed by Diderot scholars,⁵ even suggests a violence inherent in the new theatrical arrangement and the viewing position prescribed by it. While in the "old" theater spectators and actors had shared a common space of representation (usually manifest also in an architectural continuity between audience and stage), the imagined fourth wall interrupted that continuity and shook the spectators out of their spatial grounded-ness into the elusive dimension of the scenic *tableau* (a category to which I will briefly return at the end).

In the following I wish to explore the significance of this re-organization of spectatorship (which was also one of acting) for the formation of an imaginary social body. The theater of the fourth wall, I suggest, was a model place to experience an *abstract collective*, a genuinely modern notion distinguished from earlier notions of collectives based in immediate physical contact. *Experiencing* this new, abstract collective meant precisely experiencing it in a *concrete, bodily* way: as a "shaking of the ground," *tremblement de terre*. For, after all, the theater of the fourth wall remained a *theater*, a place where people physically gather in order to watch a representation by live actors. We can thus specify the thesis that the new theater provided a space for *experiencing directly and communally the transition from the 'old' to the 'new' notion of community*. In this way, it may have contributed substantially to the implementation and evolution of such significant collective notions as "the nation", "the

Visuellen bei Diderot und Lessing. Freiburg 2000; Günther Heeg, *Das Phantasma der natürlichen Gestalt. Körper, Sprache und Bild im Theater des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main/Basel 2000; Matthias Rothe, *Lesen und Zuschauen im 18. Jahrhundert. Die Erzeugung und Aufhebung von Abwesenheit*, Würzburg 2005. – See also my article (of which the present article is an expansion): „Familiendramaturgie und Nationaltheateridee. Zur Publikumskonzeption in der deutschen und französischen Dramaturgie des 18. Jahrhunderts,“ in: Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Uwe Steiner, Brunhilde Wehinger (eds.), *Europäischer Kulturtransfer im 18. Jahrhundert. Europäische Literaturen – Europäische Literatur?*, Berlin 2002 (= Aufklärung und Europa. Schriftenreihe des Forschungszentrums Europäische Aufklärung e.V.), pp. 59-77.

⁴ Denis Diderot, *De la poésie dramatique* (Das *Theater des Herrn Diderot* [note...], p. 301) (note 1) p. 198 („les esprits seront troublés tels que ceux qui, dans les tremblements d’une partie du globe, voient les murs de leurs maisons vaciller et sentent la terre se dérober sous leurs pieds“).

⁵ See, however, Suzanne Guerlac, "The Tableau and Authority in Diderot's Aesthetics", in: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 219 (1983), pp. 183-193; Günther Heeg, "Massive Erhebung. Das französische Theatertableau des 18. Jahrhunderts als Medium der Affektsteuerung und Wahrnehmungslenkung", in: Erika Fischer-Lichte (ed.), *Wahrnehmung und Medialität*, Tübingen/Basel 2001, p. 56sq.

republic”, or, for that matter, “humankind”. The theater of the fourth wall provided these collectives with an imaginary body.

Before proceeding, let me clarify that the argument principally refers to the *theoretical* concept of the fourth wall as it was elaborated in Diderot’s dramaturgical writings of the 1750’s and further developed by Lessing (who held his French contemporary in high esteem and translated his relevant works, but conceived his key ideas independently). The fact that the concept of the fourth wall became dominant in theatrical practice only in the nineteenth century – and even then not in the purity of its initial conception – does not diminish its importance for what I am calling here the experience of a modern, i.e. abstract collective.⁶ – The paper falls into two sections: The first deals with the general transformation of the social body through the new concepts of sympathy and empathy; the second then turns to some relevant specifics of the fourth wall dramaturgy and concludes with a glance at dramatic examples.

I.

Much of the scholarly work on the cultural history of the human body is based on an opposition between a traditional ‘collective’ and a modern individual body (e.g., Bakhtin, Elias, Foucault). In this perspective, the body of the disciplined modern individual, the *homo clausus*, emerged by separating itself from an earlier expansive body model characterized by intense physical exchange with its environment and other bodies – sexual, reproductive, infectious – disregarding individual body boundaries. Less attention has been paid to the new notions of collectives conceived on the basis of these “closed”, individualized bodies. In a voluminous monograph of 1999, Albrecht Koschorke has undertaken to fill this gap.⁷ Koschorke’s historical focus is on the sensibility movement of the mid-18th century, the age of *Empfindsamkeit*, whose distinctive traits he sees as the result of a fundamental shift in the physiological understanding of the body, which in its turn was tied to an equally fundamental media transformation. On the basis of a rich, mostly non-literary, source material such as medical, psychological and moral treatises and the numerous letter exchanges of the time, Koschorke shows how an older notion of the body as an „exchange system of humoral fluids“

⁶ Theater historians vary in their accounts of the actual realization of the fourth wall dramaturgy; there is, however, a general agreement (with regard to the end of the 18th century) that long before it became an “institution on stage” it had become an “institution in the mind” (“Einrichtung im Kopf”); cf. Rothe (note 3), p. 169.

⁷ Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1999. A good summary is provided by the same author’s article: “Alphabetisation und Empfindsamkeit”, in: Hans-Jürgen Schings (ed.), *Der ganze Mensch. Anthropologie und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 605-628.

physically connected with its natural environment and other bodies, was replaced by a “neurological” concept of a self-sufficient energetic system communicating with other bodies through non-corporeal channels. This new system of communication among bodies was what the age labeled, and acclaimed as, “sympathy”. “Sympathy” (and its correlate, “empathy”) designated a spiritual transference between “souls” that took the place of the former physical transaction (variably termed “transfusion,” “contagion,” “contamination,” “miasmatic” infection etc). In Koschorke’s metaphorical wording: The dissolution of the “contagious interconnectedness” (“kontagiöse Verschlungenheit”, p. 52) and “drainage of the physiological sphere of influence” (“Troddenlegung” des “physiologischen Einzugsgebiets”, p. 47, 74, 215) among the bodies led to a “new, transcending order of circulation” (p. 86) replacing *interaction* of bodies with *communication* of “souls”.

Crucial in Koschorke’s argument is the linkage between this shift in the concept of the human body and the rapidly accelerating process of alphabetization. The isolation of the physical bodies and their spiritual (re-) integration as “souls” coincided with, and were made possible by, the transformation of an older culture built on direct interaction and orality into one built on distance communication and literacy. There is no causal prior of the one transformation process over the other; both fed on each other, each strengthening the impact of the other. Still, Koschorke’s main emphasis is on the performative power of the media revolution. It was the „process of literalization of human relations”, he writes, which disempowered man’s orientation through corporeal interaction and created the condition for the “capacity of abstraction” that ultimately “distilled an idea of humanity from the structured social body of premodern society” (p. 188).

The same culture of an established literacy, Koschorke goes on to argue, created those “phantasms” of immediacy and intimacy that literary and cultural history has come to identify with the movement of *Empfindsamkeit*, without, however, taking into account their “media apriori”. This “forgetfulness” repeated the historical movement’s own suppression of its basis in widespread literacy, a suppression that was essential for its operative functioning. The telling example for the phantasmatic (re-) creation of an obsolete orality and intimate interaction under the conditions of anonymous print circulation is the genre of the epistolary novel; its form of a fictive letter exchange illustrates the correlation of physical distance and emotional closeness characteristic of the *empfindsame* psyche. Koschorke convincingly demonstrates how the same narrative structure corresponds to a new system of literary communication: In the same fashion in which the (“new”) lovers absent themselves from each other in order to achieve the ideal communication of souls, the book author bonds with the

anonymous readership in an imaginary emotional community. Seen in this perspective, the “sentimental” concept of a disembodied love only serves as the semantic representation of an underlying media strategy, namely to bring together the solitary and dispersed readers in a “community of absentees”. This, finally, touches on the last aspect in Koschorke’s study important for the present context: Fictitious orality and interaction, the author asserts, were instrumental in reconciling the new reading public with the abstract culture of writing, supplying the latter, as it were, with a face and a body. In this manner, the combination of internalized writing and the phantasms of immediacy contributed to the “generalization of the concept of ,man’ and to the development of corresponding abstract ,feelings for humanity’, i.e. the affective cathecting [*Besetzung*] of imaginary collectives“ (p. 211).

What is the place of theater in this “mediological” scenario? Somewhat surprisingly, Koschorke touches only marginally on the theater, although his argument rests to a large extent on the 18th-century concept of sympathy, which found its most obvious aesthetic realization in the theatrical genre, as already the prominent place of “empathy,” “compassion,” *Mitleid* in the dramaturgy of the time suggests. Yet the sympathy provoked by the theater performance is not identical with the one provoked by silent reading; it needs to be specified according to the nature of that medium, which is indissolubly tied to orality and physical presence. In the theater of the fourth wall, which may now also be called a *theater under the conditions of developed literacy*, sympathetic “distance communication” was enacted in the *physical presence of bodies*; and, conversely, the immediacy of this presence was broken and transformed into the ‘higher’ presence of a “communion of souls”. The theatrical imagination (to repeat: understood as the imagination of the audience of the fourth wall concept in its theoretical purity) had its place *between* the physical and the spiritual, between speaking and writing, between immediate face-to-face interaction and distance communication, and, with all this, *between a concrete and an imaginary collective*. This gave it a paradoxical nature, vacillating between the older corporeal “infection” and the new emotional “affection” model of the collective. Put positively, this two-sidedness turned the theater into a space where the transition from the one to the other, i.e. the spiritual transformation of the physical collective became itself a concrete, near-physical experience. – In order to understand this *imaginary* transaction between audience and stage that replaced the traditional *physical* one while still partaking of it, it is useful first to turn to the general concept of sympathy as it was developed within a larger conceptual framework than the theater. In 18th-century thought, sympathy is closely tied to the sense of sight as well as to the imagination. At the sight of another person’s situation and expression, in particular one of

suffering, sympathy mediates to us through the imagination that person's inner state of feeling; generally speaking, it allows humans to share the feeling of their fellow humans without being actually hit by the cause of that feeling. In this sense, sympathy qualifies quite precisely as a "medium". Whereas in the old "humoral" body concept as Koschorke describes it, emotions and affects were transferred in the mode of direct physical contact ("affection" being literally understood as "infection"), sympathy shares the dual character of corporeal distance and psychological nearness characteristic of writing and the phantasm of immediacy produced by it. Sympathy removes us from our own body and places us into another's body; it provides imaginative access – the only possible access – to the interior life of other humans by way of analogy with our own sensations and feelings. In the words of Adam Smith: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his [= the suffering person's; HJS] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, *we enter as it were into his body*, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (I,1; my emphasis).⁸

Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which accords sympathy a significant function for the build-up of society, appeared at almost the same time (1759) when Diderot and Lessing developed their dramaturgical thoughts (added to this list must be Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* from 1755 with its seminal account of the key human faculty of pity; it was instantly translated by Moses Mendelssohn and read by his friend Lessing). What makes Smith's concept relevant for the theater is its *specular*, one could even say: *spectatorial structure*. By taking sight, whether direct physical sight or an internally produced intuition (as in reading), as the source for sympathy's imaginary transposition, Smith also reflects on the specific quality that the (real or fictional) object must possess in order to arouse the spectator's sympathy. It is at this point that an *intellectual* component comes into play, which characterizes the imagination as a *universalizing* medium. While Smith insists on the (primary or secondary) immediacy of sight as origin of the sympathetic feeling, and while he even concedes the rare case of a direct corporeal "transfusion" of powerful feelings, he also insists – and especially so in the latter case – that the sheer impact of an unmotivated or unexplained passion or pain would obstruct sympathy and make the spectator turn the other way. We need to *know* the context and genesis of the particular situation in which the suffering person finds him/herself, we have to *accommodate* it to our comprehension.

⁸ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in: *The Works of Adam Smith*. In five volumes. Reprint of the edition 1811-1812, vol. 1, Aalen 1963, p. 2sq.

Knowing, which often means knowing more than the person involved, heightens our willingness to enter into the sufferer's pain. Thus, the imaginary transposition into another person's (painful) situation and the representation of his or her "passion" through "an analogous emotion" which "springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator," can be seen as a *movement from the immediate physical plane to a more general and, potentially, universal level*. The imaginary transport of 'self' into 'other' entails a process of intellectualization or spiritualization, *Vergeistigung*.

In a further step, Smith moves even closer to the theatrical condition proper when he suggests that the suffering person has to tone down the outward expression of his or her pain in order to adjust to the spectator's readiness to empathize (instead of arousing, in the extreme case, his "disgust"). The "person concerned" needs to "reduce the violence of the passions to that pitch of moderation, in which the impartial spectator can entirely enter into them". The sufferer, that is to say, must become her or his own spectator before being able to become a suitable recipient of sympathy. The passions a spectator can not enter into are foremost gross physical ones like hunger, sexuality, violence etc., but they also include extreme anger and hatred, unless these are put into a context that makes them psychologically plausible and hence accessible. We might also say, any extreme passions need to be *narrativized*. Revealing for the implied process of rationalization is the example of resentment where, according to Smith, the spectator's empathy is likely to be limited by the concern for the potential victim of the revenge. Sympathy, then, serves as a *social medium* in the literal sense of 'mediating' the one-sidedness, and implicitly the potential violence, of particular feelings and transforming them into socially compatible qualities. At one point, Smith speaks of the "mediocrity" as the necessary level of sympathy's functioning (cf. I,2: "the pitch which the spectator can go along with, must lie, it is evident, in a certain mediocrity").

As such medium of mutual moderation, sympathy is not just one feeling among others but the primary "moral sentiment" binding society together; with a term taken from another conceptual register it might be termed a *transcendental sentiment*, whose function is to negotiate and integrate the manifold of the particular, often egotistical, emotions and passions into a harmonious whole. This is exactly the function that Lessing locates in dramaturgical (tragic) compassion or pity, *Mitleid*. In his earliest account of this crucial concept, formulated in a correspondence with his Berlin friends Mendelssohn und Nicolai in the mid-fifties, Lessing insists on its categorical difference from any particular passion that may be

represented on stage.⁹ *Mitleid* is not at all a weaker copy of an original emotion (again: real or fictive), it is not, Lessing writes, a “communicated affect” (“mitgeteilter Affekt”); it is an emotion in its own right originating in the soul of the spectator at the sight of suffering. At the same time, this emotion is all-inclusive. Lessing illustrates the relation between any particular affect and the affect of pity with the simile of two strings, the first of which is “touched” or plucked (*berührt*) while the second, without being plucked, joins in the vibration (*beben*).¹⁰ Compassion as ‘co-vibration’, *Mitleid* as *Mit-Bebung*, elevates the corporeal and sensual on to a spiritual plane. It literally “abstracts,” i.e. “draws away”, the viewer from the single passion, action, or situation. In the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, which appeared more than a decade later (1768/69), Lessing expands on the dramaturgical prerequisites for the successful provocation of the compassionate “vibration” in the audience, thus bringing the theatrical character of the sympathetic constellation, only implicit in Smith, into full view. Lessing insists on the actor’s (and the playwright’s) need to tone down extreme violence, to avoid abrupt shocks and unmotivated turns and to hold on to a psychologically and pragmatically plausible continuity of action conducive to the spectator’s sympathetic identification. In this context, Smith’s “mediocrity” re-appears in Lessing’s advocacy of a “middle character” (*mittlerer Charakter*). Mostly – and correctly – seen as a result of Lessing’s ‘bourgeois leanings’, this norm of the dramatic character as being “one of us” (*mit uns von gleichem Schrot und Korne*, as the often-cited phrase goes; cf. no. 75) must also be judged as a consequence of the spectatorial arrangement inherent in the social concept of sympathy. To sum up this part of the argument: If there was an obvious dramaturgical element involved in Adam Smith’s notion of the social function of sympathy, then, in symmetrical correspondence, Lessing’s dramaturgical concept of *Mitleid* represents the essential social function of the theater. For Lessing, theater must be a school of compassion, that is, it must serve as the means and medium of socialization in a potentially egalitarian society, for, as he says, “the most compassionate man is the best man”,¹¹ the man best prepared for conversing with his fellow human beings on an equal footing. The spectator is to leave the theater performance morally improved, i.e., more sensitive to other humans’ concerns and sufferings. But the goal is not just to make each member of the audience *individually* a better human being and citizen, but to make *all of them together experience a better community already in*

⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, [*Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*], in: *Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert, vol 4, Munich 1973, pp. 153-227. Cf. especially Lessing’s letters to Friedrich Nicolai from November 1756 and to Mendelssohn from December 18, 1756. – See also the still valuable afterword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse in: Id. (ed.), G.E. Lessing, M. Mendelssohn, F. Nicolai, *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, Munich 1972.

¹⁰ To Mendelssohn, February 2, 1756; loc. cit. p. 203sq.

¹¹ *Briefwechsel* (note 9), p. 163.

the here and now of the theater; to unite them, metaphorically speaking, in a “vibrating body”, a *Schwingungskörper*, in which the particular qualities of the individuals are sublated within a higher totality. This leads us back to the thesis formulated earlier that the theater of the fourth wall provided a *physical forum* for the *actual experiencing* of the formation of an imaginary collective. What needs to be further explored is the precise relation between the individual act of sympathetic spectatorship – the empathetic identification with, or *Einfühlung* into, the scenic representation – on the one hand and this spiritual transformation of the audience as a whole.

II

If, as we have seen in Adam Smith’s theory, already the individual act of empathy involves a leveling or negotiation of the intensity of the original emotion, a concept which Lessing’s dramaturgy of *Mitleid* extended to the concept of a universal ‘emotion of emotions’ shared by all humans, then it is clear that the basis for the imaginary collective is not the identification with any specific stage character or action but rather the collective act *as such* of empathetic identification. In the process of being drawn into the scenic representation, the spectators ideally leave behind, or rise above, their particular determinations, whatever they are – social, genealogical, gender, ethnic, religious etc. – in order to merge with their fellow spectators across all boundaries in what Lessing on one occasion succinctly calls “the communal feeling of sympathizing spirits” (*das gemeinschaftliche Gefühl sympathisierender Geister*)¹². To be sure, there were specific dramatic subjects such as the ones taken from the intimate life of the nuclear or “bourgeois” family that were deemed particularly, or even exclusively, suitable for eliciting the (middle class) spectators’ empathy. But this thematic dimension it to be considered secondary to the primary act of subjective *Einfühlung* and its communal sharing. The same holds true of the intended moral effect: The spectators were certainly expected to recognize “their own” world in the play’s content and performance and possibly even to draw some moral instruction from it (e.g., the ludicrousness of a specific prejudice, such as anti-Semitism, or the worthiness of the virtuous), but far more important was the overriding experience of their shedding all arbitrary and conventional boundaries and coming together in the awareness of a common humanity. “How beautiful mankind is in the theater!” Diderot exclaims. “Why separate again so quickly? Men are so good and happy when the righteous

¹² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freimäurer*, in: *Werke* (note 9), vol. 8, Munich 1979, p. 481

man receives their applause, when he brings them together and unites them!”¹³ Not in the moral message of the righteous character and the plot lay the principal impact ascribed to the theater performance, but in the audience’s merging in general sympathy, brought about by each individual’s act of spontaneous empathy. A well known review of the premiere of Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy *Miss Sara Sampson* in 1755 reports that the spectators “for three and a half hours have listened, sat still like statues and kept weeping”.¹⁴

At this point, a brief look at the technical arrangement of the “fourth wall” theater in comparison with the traditional court theater is helpful.¹⁵ The dramaturgy of the fourth wall not only separated the stage from the auditorium by making its front an invisible threshold between two ontologically distinct worlds – “He who acts and he who watches are two very different beings”, Diderot writes¹⁶ – it also isolated the spectators from each other and minimized their physical presence. When at the start of the performance the lights in the auditorium were extinguished and the eyes and ears of the otherwise immobilized and muted spectators became exclusively (forcibly, one is tempted to say) fixed on the lit stage in front of them, they were cut off from their existential ties and lured into a wholly imaginary cosmos. Historical documents attest to the difficult task of accustoming the spectators to the disciplined passive role necessary for this immersion.¹⁷ In contrast, the court stage had served as an eminent space of self-presentation for the members of that society; it reflected, in crystallized artistic form, the ceremonial behavior, ostentatious role-play, and celebratory rhetoric characteristic of the court aristocracy. Here, the stage action only extended (and elevated) the theatricality of the habitual social interaction of the audience; the roles of actors and spectators were mutually interchangeable, each individual seeing and being seen at the same time. Architecture, decoration, light, costumes, the physical position of the actors, and last but not least the presence of (privileged) spectators on-stage and the stage-like arrangement of spectators in the boxes – all these elements stressed the principal *continuity* between the world on stage and the social world in the auditorium. The festive theater event of the court society gathered its participants in a homogeneous space where they performed as actors of roles and actors of themselves who had to maintain (and potentially raise) their

¹³ PROBLEMA!! NICHT GEFUNDEN

¹⁴ Lessing, Werke (note ...), vol 2, Munich 1971, p.693 (letter by Ramler to Gleim, July 25, 1755).

¹⁵ Still very informative is: Dagobert Frey, „Zuschauer und Bühne. Eine Untersuchung über das Realitätsproblem des Schauspiels“, in: *Kunstwissenschaftliche Grundfragen. Prolegomena zu einer Kunstphilosophie*, Wien 1946, 151-223.

¹⁶ (“Celui qui agit et celui qui regarde, sont deux êtres très different”)

¹⁷ This aspect has been stressed recently by several authors, see for instance Rudolf Dreßler, *Von der Schaubühne zur Sittenschule. Das Theaterpublikum vor der vierten Wand*, Berlin 1993, and Heeg, *Phantasma* (note...). See also the interesting case study by Susanne Eigenmann, *Zwischen ästhetischer Raserei und aufgeklärter Disziplin. Hamburger Theater im späten 18. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart/Weimar 1994.

status and prestige within the set hierarchy. It provided a *heightening affirmative mirror* of that society; by no means did it aim at the kind of self-transcending and self-transformation inherent in the new concept of the fourth wall.

Here, the *discontinuity* between stage and auditorium and the *isolation* of the individual spectators from their social environment served to create another world in the imaginary. But crucially: If the spectators' physical presence was subdued or even suppressed, it was not, of course, eliminated from their consciousness. After all, it was the continuing awareness of that presence despite the isolated viewers' absorption in the scenic illusion that distinguished the theatrical performance from the act of solitary reading. If Koschorke aptly dubs the new readership of the 18th century a "community of absentees", then the new theater audience represents an assembly of spectators *absenting themselves* in the process of projecting themselves into the scenic fiction and simultaneously, by the *collective nature of this act*, transforming themselves into a spiritual community. This *communal* transformation carried with it emphatic moments that resembled, indeed continued, features of the older collective body: moments of festivity and "infection" that now served the promotion of an intellectual collective which drew its energy from the extinction of all extraneous differences and revealed in the vision of a universal transparency of souls.¹⁸ Diderot, for example, sees a touchstone for an individual's moral integrity in the ability to have his emotions heightened by those of others in the theater: "The man whose emotions are not heightened by the great number of those who share in them, must possess some hidden vice; there is in his character something [...] of a recluse which I do not like."¹⁹ Twenty years later, Sébastien Mercier, a follower of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, invokes the power of the theater to give society's alienated members the experience "that, despite our public life, which seems to legitimize general fractiousness, we can nevertheless be united".²⁰ Mercier calls for the enlargement of the auditorium and the tearing down of its dividing walls and boxes in order to encourage an "infinite flowing together of people" who will join in the general emotion (*Rührung*) of "unanimously shed

¹⁸ One example from Rémond de Saint-Albine, a theoretician of acting whom Lessing esteemed, here with reference to the emotion of „tristesse“: „Cette affection de l'ame [sic] est une espece [sic] de maladie épidémique, dont les progrès sont aussi rapides qu'étonnans. Contraire aux autres maladies, elle se communique par les yeux & par les oreilles“. Quoted in Alexander Košenina, *Anthropologie und Schauspielkunst. Studien zur „eloquentia corporis“ im 18. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen 1995, p. S. 128.

¹⁹ Diderot, *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, in : *Œuvres esthétiques* (note 1), pp. 69-175, here p. 127.

²⁰ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, in: id., *Mon Bonnet de Nuit suivi de Du Théâtre*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet, Paris 1999, p. 1235 (translation mine). (« Lorsque tout semble solliciter à l'égoïsme, enhardir la cupidité, chérissons les seuls moyens qui peuvent nous persuader que nos compatriotes ne nous sont pas étrangers, que nous pouvons être unis en dépit des mœurs publiques, qui semblent autoriser la scission générale. ») See the contemporary German translation: Sébastien Mercier/Heinrich Leopold Wagner, *Neuer Versuch über die Schauspielkunst. Aus dem Französischen. Mit einem Anhang aus Goethes Brieftasche*. Faksimiledruck nach der Ausgabe von 1776, ed. Peter Pfaff, Heidelberg 1967, p. 137.

tears”, tears of sympathy that carry the audience “beyond all the narrow purposes of self-love [amour-propre] and personal interest”²¹ (p. 283sq.) the future “national drama”, he proclaims, will “connect the people with each other through the conquering emotion of pity and mutual sharing”²² (p. 1).

In Germany, the most fervent evocation of the theater viewers’ universal bonding is Schiller’s address of 1784 “On the Theater As a Moral Institution” (Über die Schaubühne als moralische Anstalt). Schiller starts out with the image of a collective melted together. Combining metaphorically the “light” of the frame stage with the idea of an ‘enlightenment from above’ typical of the alliance of German intellectuals with Enlightened Absolutism, Schiller writes: “The theater is the common channel through which the light of wisdom pours down from the thinking better part of the people, and from where it spreads in ever milder rays throughout the whole state.”²³

The text culminates in the rhetorical celebration of the theater event as a truly mystic moment in which all barriers of the conventional world of artifice (*künstliche Welt*) fall down and humanity looks itself into the eye:

And then, finally – what a triumph for you, Nature [...] - when humans from all regions and classes, having thrown off all shackles of artifice and fashion, having been torn away from all throes of fate, becoming brothers through *one* all-weaving sympathy, being absorbed into *one* kind, forget themselves and the world and come near their celestial origin. Each one of them enjoys the raptures of all, which fall back on him stronger and more beautiful from a hundred eyes, and there is now in his chest room for only one feeling – it is this: to be a *human*. (Und dann endlich – welch ein Triumph für dich, Natur [...] – wenn Menschen aus allen Zonen und Ständen, abgeworfen jede Fessel der Künstelei und der Mode, herausgerissen aus jedem Drange des Schicksals, durch *eine* allwebende Sympathie verbrüderet, in *ein* Geschlecht wieder aufgelöst, ihrer selbst und der Welt vergessen und ihrem himmlischen Ursprung sich nähern. Jeder einzelne genießt die Entzückungen aller, die verstärkt und verschönert aus hundert Augen auf ihn zurückfallen, und seine Brust gibt jetzt nur *einer* Empfindung Raum – es ist diese: ein *Mensch* zu sein. (p. 831; emphasis mine, HJS)

This apotheosis of the theater audience as the physical epiphany of the idea of humanity appears to have been inspired by Rousseau’s famous glorification of the political community celebrating itself by fusing together in an all-encompassing look into each other’s eye. Yet Rousseau’s *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (which appeared in 1758, in close proximity to Diderot’s dramatic and dramaturgical writings) was a pointed attack against the theater institution, indeed the harshest anti-theatrical polemic of the age, reminiscent of

²¹ “[...] aucun ne pourra se dérober aux traits de cette sympathie si supérieure aux vues retrécies de l’amour-propre et de l’intérêt personnel” (ibid., p. 1337).

²² “[...] il s’agit de rendre ce tableau utile, c’est-à-dire de le mettre à la portée du plus grand nombre, afin que l’image qu’il présentera serve à lier entre eux les hommes par le sentiment victorieux de la compassion e de la pitié” (ibid., p. 1141).

²³ Friedrich Schiller, « Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken? », [original title], in : *Werke*, ed. Gerhart Fricke und Herbert G. Göpfert, 9. Aufl., Bd. 5, München ¹⁹1993, p.828 (translation mine).

traditional theological invectives. For Rousseau, the theater represented the collective degeneration of society into a fraudulent and inauthentic state which it continuously reinforced; the spectators' gaze, directed from the dark auditorium on to the bright stage, amounted to their seduction into a chimerical world that instilled into them an infinite and insatiable desire and drew them away from their familial and civic bonds and duties. To this alienating experience Rousseau opposed the image of the festive crowd gathering under the open sky; the fictive stage representation and its passive consumption were to be replaced with the *self-representation* of the 'people'.

The comparison with Rousseau illuminates the *imaginary* character of Schiller's collective evoked by the theatrical representation. While Rousseau concerned himself with the festive self-staging of a political community, taken in its original sense of the *polis*, which the Geneva-born Paris intellectual saw corrupted by a theater identified with the court tradition, Schiller exalts the common feeling of an *abstract humanity* ("ein Mensch zu sein") stripped of all foreign determinations. For Schiller, the theater audience becomes a symbolic body representing humankind, whereas Rousseau focused on the celebratory elevation of a small community that does not extend beyond its physical boundaries ("visible at a glance"). And yet, Rousseau's festive crowd likewise suggests an entity transfigured into a transparent, quasi-immaterial whole, manifest by the exclusive communication through the eye: this is *not* the pre-modern body Koschorke describes, nor the Bakhtinian body collective. Both Rousseau and Schiller extol the moment of a collective fusion, only what for Rousseau is the heightened moment within the continuity of civic interaction when the political body becomes aware of itself, for Schiller - as for the dominant dramaturgy of the time - is the transcending (cf. "abgeworfen", "herausgerissen") constitution of a universal body brought about by the theater performance.

This universal bonding in mutual transparency, finally, is achieved through the drama's and the performance's own psychological transparency; it is through the insight into the interior life of its characters that the play brings about the spiritual body of the audience. Here the semiotics of the new stage intersect with the form and content of the new dramatic production. Again, a glance at Rousseau's anti-theatrical stance is illuminating. Rousseau had directed his critique in particular against matters of political and erotic intrigue for their intrinsic evocation of ambition, flattery, hierarchy or their provocation of frivolousness, coquettishness, masquerade. These *sujets* were typical of an institution which for him was founded on simulation and dissimulation, in utter opposition to the cherished values of sincerity, authenticity, and transparency. But the latter values were also the ones on which the

fourth wall dramaturgy was founded, as its preferred setting in the private and domestic sphere and its call for emotional identification demonstrates. When Rousseau wrote his anti-theater polemic, the new domestic drama had barely made its way to the stage (he may, however, have known the two model plays by his fellow encyclopedist Diderot.)

Nevertheless, even the intimate family values of Diderot's *Fils naturel* and *Père de famille* would not have changed Rousseau's denunciation of the theatrical medium, which is at its core a critique of fictional representation as such. It is the assuming of a fictional "role" as such, no matter what its nature, both on the side of the actor and the empathetic spectator that for Rousseau undermines the authenticity of the family and civic life and leads man astray from the narrow confines of responsible interaction. To put it in the most pointed way: The on-stage "house father" could only represent the true house father's perversion.

I wish to conclude with a brief look at Diderot's domestic dramas and dramaturgy of the mid-fifties (theory and practice are here closely interwoven and may not be separated from each other). These writings attempt to reconcile the values of transparency and intimacy with the theater, and therefore provide the best illustration both of the intent and the aporia of the fourth wall. In particular, *Le fils naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu* together with its dialogue frame, *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, containing the author's fictional discussions with his hero about the play, (1757) carries the experiment of an "authentic theater" to a paradoxical extreme. The author Diderot pretends to have met his protagonist in a provincial town far from Paris (and its corrupt theater, one is to conclude), who invites him to be the secret observer of a theater performance staged exclusively by and for members of his family in commemoration of an important episode in their life exactly one year ago. The father of the "natural son" had commissioned the play from him immediately after the event, asking for absolute faithfulness to the facts as they happened and the words as they were spoken, as well as for the identity of the real and the stage actors. This, then, is not designed to be a "play" but the script for a commemorative family rite, to be repeated every year on the original scene, the family *salon*, for an indefinite future. Yet the fictional and theatrical character of the representation can not be eliminated. In the *Entretiens*, Dorval, the son and (fictional) author attests to his difficult position between these two roles and their irreconcilable dictates: As son he has to stick to the father's imposition of faithfulness to the facts, as dramatist he needs to heed aesthetic standards, specifically the norm of *vraisemblance*. (Incidentally, this is also a conflict between two family concepts, one relying on linear genealogy – adherence to the legacy of the father – and one, on egalitarian siblinghood; this perspective finds its expression in the protagonist's status as "natural son" and ties in with the idea of spiritualization.)

The intended non-theatrical character of the “family play” is further violated on the level of performance, first by the spectator, represented by the hidden visitor and voyeur “Diderot,” and second by the outside actor who has to substitute for the recently deceased father. The hidden Diderot is a perfect allegory of the new role of the spectator as voyeur (the unobserved observer). Even more significant is the fact of the father’s death and his replacement by a “professional”. In the frame text, Diderot claims to have received the written manuscript from his friend Dorval after the performance was abruptly broken off a few moments before the end. This happened when the “authentic” family players all broke into tears at the appearance on stage of the actor-father, which reminded them of the loss of their real father. Diderot confesses that at this instant he was tempted to join the common grief and jump on the stage. *Being a stranger* (the visitor Diderot) is the one marker of distance between reality and performance, *death* is the other. And it is this twofold distance that provides the condition for both a *wider* and more *intensely bonded* community. The clandestine spectator from Paris wishing to become part of a family body melting in tears because of the father’s death signifies the new dramaturgy’s ultimate utopian intent.

Put differently: Separation and loss lie at the origin of the spiritual community.²⁴ The action of the play reproduces this figure on the level of the romantic plot: The natural son renounces his passionate desire for the fiancée of his friend (who does the same), a desire which turns out to be of an unconsciously incestuous nature, since the two are – unbeknownst to themselves – siblings. When the long-absent father, who is also unknown to his children, finally comes home and reveals the blood relationship, he only puts his paternal seal on a sacrifice that the lovers have already made on their own. Passion and “blood” – incest being the metaphor for the entanglement both in sexuality and the origin – are overcome not by the external contingencies of genealogy or the law, as embodied in the father, but by reason and virtue.

This victory, however, demands a heavy price: the price of carnal desire, the price of the body. A similar price has to be paid by the spectator, whose embodiment in the fictional world of the stage presupposes his abstraction from his existential, corporeal and social rooted-ness. The discontinuity stressed earlier between the audience and the stage and the transition (or should we say: leap) from the one to the other – what I called spiritualization,

²⁴ For this point, cf. Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder*. Afterword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. The afterword enlarges the concept into the concept of a “sacrificial structure of modernity”. The notion of loss and sacrifice is also stressed by Heeg (note xxx), pp. 83sq., who applies it specifically to the death of the female (daughter) in bourgeois tragedy. Beyond the often invoked father-daughter constellation, I would like to suggest a “sacrificial structure” of the *plot as a whole* in that it subordinates the individual characters (as well as the actors on the level of the performance) under the order of an overarching “whole”.

Vergeistigung – demands the sacrifice of the sensual and particular (for which the female body is but one, however prominent, symbolic representation). This sacrifice comes about on the level of the stage action taken in its whole; it transcends the spectators' empathetic identification with a particular character, just as the individual actors, by projecting themselves into their respective roles, become part of a larger entity. Therefore, the "imaginary collective" of the audience finds its equivalent in the structure of the dramatic *text*, which is characterized by the integration of the manifold into a meaningful totality; in other words, by the sublimation of the "genealogical" and factual into the fictional.

Diderot's concept of the *tableau*, which challenges the physical, three-dimensional character of the stage, can be seen as the formal equivalent of this spirituality. Commonly designating the "painting-like" quality of an enclosing visual frame, or "still," applied to the theatrical stage the term emphasizes as it were the non-corporeality of the world the spectator enters into.²⁵ The *tableau* as the inherent *telos* of the theatrical performance marks the sacrifice of the spectator's individual body.

Lessing's great enlightenment play, *Nathan der Weise* (1779), will make a similar moral sacrifice and overcoming of incestuous passion the basis for a spectacular reunion of dispersed and unwitting family members of different ethnicities and creeds. When at the end "the curtain falls among repeated embraces," as the stage instruction says, this symbolic family of mankind includes all members of the theater audience and beyond. The spiritual community which the fourth wall dramaturgy aimed to produce appears to reach its climax at the very same moment that the visible scene is withdrawn from the spectators. The

²⁵ In an important essay, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," which stresses the intellectual and moral ("ideological") quality of the theatrical *tableau*, Roland Barthes cites a passage from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* article "Composition", which compares the perfect *tableau* to the organization of the body: "A well-composed picture [*tableau*] is a whole contained under a single point of view, in which the parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence a unity as real as that of the members of the body of an animal; so that a piece of painting made up of a large number of figures thrown at random on to the canvas, with neither proportion, intelligence nor unity, no more deserves to be called a *true composition* than scattered studies of legs, nose and eyes on the same cartoon deserve to be called a *portrait* or even a *human figure*." Barthes analyses critically: "Thus is the body expressly introduced into the idea of the *tableau*, but it is the whole body that is so introduced – the organs, grouped together and as though held in cohesion by the magnetic power of the segmentation, function in the name of a transcendence, that of the *figure*, which receives the full fetishistic load and becomes the sublime substitute of meaning: it is this meaning that is fetishized." The connection between the ideal body organism (specifically, the human body as realized in sculpture) and the "well composed" *tableau* – for Barthes the "fetish" of meaning - opens up yet another perspective pertinent to our topic of empathy and the formation of an ideal or imaginary collective. For the body sculpture served as a model object of the faculty of *Einfühlung*, precisely in that it was distinguished by its ideal wholeness, *Ganzheit*, produced by the abstraction from all corporeal 'particularities'. (Cf. especially Herder's text *Plastik*.) - Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein", in: *Image, Music Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, New York 1988, pp. 69-78; p. 71sq. (emphasis original). German translation in: Id., *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn*. Kritische Essays III. Aus dem Französischen von Dieter Hornig, Frankfurt am Main 1990, S. 96. The Diderot quote in: „Composition“: „Un tableau bien composé est un tout renfermé sous un seul point de vue, où les parties concourent à un même but, et forment par leur correspondance mutuelle un ensemble aussi réel, que celui des membres dans un corps animal.”

“transcendence” of this process reveals its religious background: On the title page of his drama, Lessing put the epigraph: “Introite, nam et heic dei sunt;” “enter, here too are the gods”. A similar religious dimension opens up in Diderot’s eulogy of Samuel Richardson, whose epistolary family novels were a supreme source of inspiration for the new drama and dramaturgy. For Diderot, these texts compare with “an even holier book, an evangile brought to earth in order to separate the husband from the spouse, the father from the son, the daughter from the mother, the brother from the sister”. Just as Christ postulated the separation of worldly family ties in the name of a higher, spiritual family, Richardson and his followers postulate the production of spiritual family of mankind. Sacrifice and the eucharist emerge to be the ultimate goal of the dramaturgy of the fourth wall.