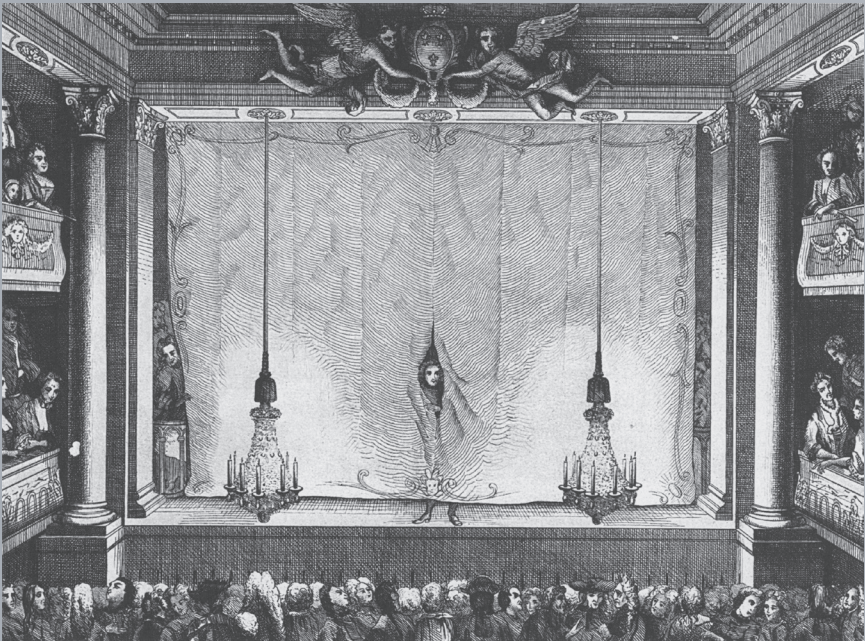


Mimmi Woisnitza

# DRAMATURGIES OF THEATRICAL IMAGINATION

Spectatorial Agency in Lessing and Kleist



Mimmi Woisnitza

**Dramaturgies of Theatrical Imagination**  
Spectatorial Agency in Lessing and Kleist

**ROMBACH WISSENSCHAFT • REIHE SCENAE**

herausgegeben von Gabriele Brandstetter und Clemens Risi

**Band 21**

Mimmi Woisnitza

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Cover illustration: Eugène-Andrè Champollion (after Charles-Antoine Coypel), Auditorium and stage before a performance at the old Comédie-Française on the rue des Fossés Saint-Germain-des-Près, 1726 (Coypel), 1875 (Champollion), Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française.

**Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-96821-642-3 (Print)  
978-3-96821-643-0 (ePDF)

#### **British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-96821-642-3 (Print)  
978-3-96821-643-0 (ePDF)

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Woisnitza, Mimmi

Dramaturgies of Theatrical Imagination

Spectatorial Agency in Lessing and Kleist

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289 pp.

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-96821-642-3 (Print)  
978-3-96821-643-0 (ePDF)



Onlineversion  
Nomos eLibrary

1. Auflage 2020

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*In honor of Dr. Karin Kramer  
and for Eliane*



## Acknowledgments

This study is the result of a pivotal period in my life, both personally and academically, and I embrace the opportunity to thank the people who have accompanied and supported me along the way.

Since the book began as a dissertation, my first thanks go to the academic environment at the University of Chicago's Department of Germanic Studies, which enabled me to develop and advance my topic, and, first and foremost, to my doctoral advisers. I thank Christopher J. Wild for his insistence on accuracy in interpretation, historical reference, and argumentation, which has challenged me to hone and broaden my capacities for all three. I am also grateful to David E. Wellbery, who I was privileged to call a teacher and mentor in my first days at Chicago, and whose virtuosity and passion for engaging with literature and philosophy beyond disciplinary boundaries have had a lasting influence on my self-understanding as a scholar. Special thanks go to David J. Levin, who not only opened my eyes to a theoretically informed view of historical and contemporary theatre practices, and thus to an area of interest that still characterizes my work today, but whose animated scholarship – as thoughtful as it is generous – has become a model for me. And I shall not forget to mention my friends and colleagues, to whom I will always remain indebted for their constant interest and intellectual and personal support: Leigh Ann Smith-Gary, Nicole Jerr, Hannah Eldridge, Amy Stebbins, Malika Maskarinec, Katharina Loew, Anthony Mahler, Stephen Halswell Todd, Joshua Bonilla, and Peter Erickson.

Deepest thanks go to my colleagues at the Institute of Philosophy and Sciences of Art at Leuphana University in Lüneburg, who in recent years have inspired me to expand my thinking and methodology. Above all, I want to thank Beate Söntgen, who has not only tirelessly encouraged me in my work and scholarly approach, but who has also provided me with substantial support for the publication of this book. I would also like to express my special thanks to Gabriele Brandstetter and Clemens Risi for including my study in the »Scenae« series with Rombach Wissenschaft – I could not wish for a better context for this book, and Friederike Wursthorn for her warm support at Nomos publishing. Finally, profound thanks go, once again, to my dear friend and colleague Leigh Ann Smith-Gary, whose astute and precise edits and comments have contributed greatly to the final stages of preparing this book.



## Acknowledgments

My personal thanks go to Tan Wälchli, who has been my partner in countless conversations about the material that fills these pages – conversations from which arguments and, ultimately, chapters emerged; and to our daughter Eliane, who demonstrates the inexhaustible powers and delicate plasticity of our imagination every day.

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## Theater and the Imagination in Lessing and Kleist

In the 1803 December Issue of the *Neue Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*, the sixty-year-old librarian and literary critic Ernst Theodor Langer (1743–1820) reviewed the drama *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, which twenty-five-year-old Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) had just published anonymously.<sup>1</sup> Langer lauds the aspiring newcomer as a »capable mind« (»ein fähiger Kopf«) but worries that he might »not yet be able to keep rhythm« (*LS*, 95f.).<sup>2</sup> He explains this propensity for irregularity by referring to the young writer's imagination:

Seiner Einbildungskraft kann er unmöglich ein Haar breit den Zügel weiter schießen lassen, ohne ins Ungenießbare zu stürzen. Jeder Schritt also zurück, wird für die Kunst, und für ihn selbst Gewinn sein; da er denn wohl fühlen wird, daß auch im geregelten Raum sich noch frei genug atmen läßt (95f.).

By contending that the drama is at risk of becoming unpleasurable (»ungenießbar«) if the dramatist were to allow his imagination even slightly freer reign, Langer argues in terms of a reciprocal relationship between artistic production and aesthetic reception: What makes an artwork delightful – or at least tolerable – to the recipient appears to hinge on the appropriate deployment of the imagination. In making this observation, Langer alludes to the notion of aesthetic pleasure, which served as a guiding principle for artistic production in the Enlightenment and German

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1 *Die Familie Schroffenstein* was published anonymously in 1803 by Kleist's friends Heinrich Gessner and Ludwig Wieland, the son of Christoph Martin Wieland, the renowned writer of Weimar classicism. Wieland was not only friends with Goethe and Schiller, but one of Kleist's early benefactors as well.

2 »Daß der ungenannte Verfasser ein junger, noch nicht taktfester Mann ist, verräth schon sein Vortrag, als dem man den Mangel vorläufiger Übung nur zu häufig ansieht. Aus den Überladungen, Eccentricitäten und übrigen Fehlern in Plan und Darstellung, woran es dem Stücke gleichfalls nicht mangelt, läßt heut zu Tage sich weit unsicherer auf die Mündigkeit eines Autors schließen; denn seitdem das deutsche Publikum gegen regelrechte Dramen sich so kaltsinnig zeigt, daß selbst unsre besten Köpfe stutzig geworden, und nicht weiter bekümmert, ob auf Kosten der Natur und Kunst dem neuesten Ungeschmack fröhnen: seit solch einer Umkehr der Dinge geschieht es zu oft nur, daß Schriftsteller, die etwas ungleich Besseres liefern könnten, nicht selten auch wirklich schon geliefert haben, lieber auf den Preis der Nachwelt als den Flitter des Augenblicks Verzicht thun, und somit die Verstimmung noch höher treiben helfen!« (*LS*, 5f.).

Idealism.<sup>3</sup> Yet such aesthetic pleasure, Langer emphasizes, depends upon a careful balance between the freedom of the imagination and its normative regulation.<sup>4</sup> Even though he explicitly acknowledges the »richness« of Kleist's »imagination« as an asset, he attributes its »violation of nature, taste, and decency« to a lack of moderation (95).<sup>5</sup> Thus, Langer argues in favor of a regulatory pragmatics, which, while guaranteeing a certain degree of conventional pleasure for the audience, also allows the artist, in his words, to »breathe freely« (95).

On closer inspection, Langer's argument aligns with a more general discursive shift surrounding the imagination in eighteenth-century philosophy and poetics. In a departure from the long philosophical tradition of understanding the imagination as a somewhat unreliable mediator between sensual perception and reason, philosophers such as Christian Wolff, Alexander Baumgarten, Moses Mendelssohn, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Immanuel Kant investigated the potential benefits of mental

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- 3 The notion that an artwork must elicit some form of delight in its recipient to achieve any kind of higher purpose derives from the *prodesse-delectare* dictum that Horaz introduced in *Ars Poetica*, where he distinguishes *prodesse*, *delectare*, and both together as three equally valid rhetorical functions. Eighteenth-century aesthetics considers the delight (*delectare*) a work of art elicits a necessary precondition for its benefit (*prodesse*) – to such an extent that aesthetic delight becomes an end in itself, or, as Langer's »ungenießbar« in the double sense of »undelightful« as well as »inedible« suggests, equals comprehensibility as such. On the *prodesse-delectare* dictum in Enlightenment and Idealism, cf. Till, 130–140; Wöhrle, 521–523.
  - 4 Among the first to speculate about the specific »pleasures« of imaginative activity was Joseph Addison, who, in his influential essay »Pleasures of the Imagination« (1712), makes the case that the imagination allows for a spontaneous understanding of beauty. As Addison states in *The Spectator*: »[T]he pleasures of the imagination have this advantage above those of the understanding, that they are more obvious, and more easy to be acquired. It is but opening the eye, and the scene enters. The colours paint themselves on the fancy, with very little attention of thought or application of mind in the beholder. We are struck, we know not how, with the symmetry of anything we see, and immediately assent to the beauty of an object, without inquiring into the particular causes and occasions of it.« (No. 411, 822). Cf. also Kehl, 116f.
  - 5 »Selbst der leidige Umstand, daß die Hälfte der hier verbrauchten Farben sein Gemälde tragisch genug gelassen hätte, ist ein Mißgriff, der nur reichen Imaginationen eigen bleibt. [...] Bei den Fehlern des Stückes länger zu verweilen, hält Rez. für unnötig. Sein Verfasser ist offenbar ein so fähiger Kopf, daß er sein Erzeugnis nur nach Jahr und Tag wieder anzusehen braucht, um die es noch entstellenden Verstöße gegen Natur, Geschmack und Schicklichkeit auch ungewarnt wahrzunehmen.« (LS, 95).

representation.<sup>6</sup> They were interested in the ways in which the imagination could offer enhanced access to external sensual phenomena, thereby extending the epistemological capacities of the mind. This newfound appreciation for the imagination provided the grounds upon which poetic theorists such as Johann Christoph Gottsched, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Johann Jacob Bodmer, Johann Jacob Breitinger, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and, later, Friedrich Schiller thought about and debated concrete ways of utilizing the imagination's creative powers for apposite and maximally effective poetic production.

There can be no doubt that Langer was familiar with these aesthetic discourses. As a student in Leipzig in the 1760s, he was a protégé of Gellert's. He befriended Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the 1770s and is said to have been on cordial terms with Lessing, who may have recommended him as his successor at the Wolfenbüttel library.<sup>7</sup> In short, Langer can be viewed as representative of the literary establishment of the late eighteenth century, and his review makes it very clear that Kleist's debut does not dovetail neatly with his expectations and standards. But what exactly are these standards? What kinds of aesthetic pleasure are endangered when the rules are bent or even broken? In what ways do the aesthetics of the theater call for a specific set of functions for the imagination? What does it mean for a dramatist's imagination to remain within the limits of poetic conventions? In other words, might the »eccentricities« of Kleist's imagination be, in

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6 For a thorough overview of the conceptual history of the imagination, see Schulte-Sasse's entry in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, 120. Those most closely associated with the theorization of the imagination in English moral sense theory and in Sentimentalism, which became very influential for the German Enlightenment, include Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Addison, David Hume, and Adam Smith. Cf. Dürbeck, 55–75. On Baumgarten cf. Dürbeck, 182–194; on Mendelssohn cf. Dürbeck, 195–204; on Meyer cf. Dürbeck, 285–306; Hermann, 176–198. On Herder's notion of *force* (*Kraft*), which also informs his concept of the imagination, cf. Christoph Menke, *Kraft*.

7 The most comprehensive account of Langer's intellectual environment and his correspondence remains, to this day, Paul Zimmermann's »Ernst Theodor Langer. Bibliothekar in Wolfenbüttel, ein Freund Goethes und Lessings« (1883). Even though the article strikes the contemporary reader as rather biased, it is valuable for its rich collection of sources. On Langer's acquaintance with Lessing, Zimmermann writes: »Daß Lessing ihn [Langer, M.W.] bei alledem hochschätzte, geht aus dessen Benehmen zur Genüge hervor. In Lessing's Hause hat Langer offenbar viel verkehrt. Er selbst berichtet in einem Schreiben an [Friedrich] Nicolai, daß er oft ganze Monate Lessing's einziger Gesellschafter gewesen. [...] Einen besonderen Freundesdienst erwies Lessing aber Langer dadurch, daß er ihn nach dem Zeugnisse Hettlings selbst dem Herzoge Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand zuführte und als seinen Nachfolger [als Bibliothekar, M.W.] empfahl« (31–32).



fact, not merely »mistakes«, as Langer contends, but a radical response to the very theatrical and dramatic establishment that Langer himself represents? If so, what exactly were the contemporary debates and dramatic conventions that Kleist set out to disregard as early as in his very first play?

In retrospect, Langer's unease with the results of Kleist's artistic imagination allows us to revisit the alleged »untimeliness« and »relentlessness« for which more recent scholarship has lauded the young dramatist's work.<sup>8</sup> The review renders visible Kleist's profound dissatisfaction with both the philosophical debates and poetic and dramatic practices of his time and, in doing so, hints at the dramatist's alternative aesthetic strategies. To what extent and in what ways the dramatic implementation of the imagination determines the (un)pleasurable aesthetic effect on an audience is a matter of changing dramatic and theatrical conventions. An investigation of Kleist's employment of imaginative strategies in his plays – unbridled as they might seem – offers a new and instructive perspective on the situatedness of his dramatic practice within the history of drama: What were the functions that the imagination assumed in eighteenth-century theater – in theory as well as in praxis?

It seems reasonable to begin an exploration of the imagination's functions in the (long) eighteenth century's theater culture with Lessing, who not only extensively theorized the aesthetic function of the imagination but also devoted the better part of his life to the theater and its institution-alization. Lessing was among the earliest protagonists in the debates regarding the imagination. In his essay *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malhery und Poesie* (1766), he famously introduces the notion of the »free play of the imagination«, which Langer may be alluding to when he acknowledges the artist's need to »breathe freely« as the enabling condition for aesthetic pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Later, when Lessing situates the theatrical arts between poetry (»arbitrary signs«) and painting (»natural signs«) in his *Ham-*

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8 In their attempts to grapple with the density and hermetic qualities of Kleist's oeuvre, scholars have often referred to the author's »untimeliness«. Cf. most recently Blamberger/Stefan, who state: »Kleist fällt aus seiner Zeit [...] heraus« and remains the »denkbar größte [...] Ausnahmefall bis heute« (*Kleist: Krise und Experiment*, 14). Szondi deems the *Familie Schrockenstein* likely the »kühnste seiner tragischen Konzeptionen« (247) precisely because it pushes the boundaries of dramatic conventions.

9 In contrasting the aesthetic effects of poetry and painting, Lessing argues that a painter cannot benefit from the inherently imaginative and transitory quality of poetry, but must confront the static and one-dimensional quality of pictorial representation instead. In order for the painter to *move* the beholder, i.e. to elicit »a free play of the imagination«, he has to choose the »pregnant moment« of a given narrative: »Kann der Künstler von der

*burgische Dramaturgie*<sup>10</sup>, he invokes the question of how to keep the imagination at play in the theater as a central concern. This question gains additional significance in view of Lessing's life-long engagement with theater praxis. Not only do his writings reflect theoretically upon contemporary theater culture, but, in his plays, and later as dramaturge of the Hamburg National Theater, he experiments practically with unconventional dramatic and dramaturgical tools in order to reform the theater of his times. One can thus infer that Lessing's work explores the notion of a »free play of the imagination« in the context of the theater, and that such an approach provides the foil to which Kleist's »unbridled use« of the imagination responds. In fact, in his review, Langer himself raises Lessing as a possible point of contrast for Kleist's drama. He complains that *Die Familie Schroffenstein* »borrows« all too conspicuously from a phrase in »*Lessings Nathan*« and suggests that, in comparison with the latter, Kleist's poetic production of meaning falls short (*LS*, 96).<sup>11</sup>

Yet it is not merely cases of contrast that connect Lessing with Kleist; they enjoy a sort of kinship with regard to poetic and dramaturgical methodology as well. Both authors, as we will see, are deeply concerned with the social and political consequences of aesthetic processes. Both tend to use their writings, and in particular their dramatic writings, to negotiate theoretical positions and experiment with generic boundaries to explore audience impact. They conceive of the stage as a kind of spectatorial laboratory – a laboratory in which they test out different theatrical

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immer veränderlichen Natur nie mehr als einen einzigen Augenblick, und der Maler insbesondere diesen einzigen Augenblick auch nur aus einem einzigen Gesichtspunkte, brauchen; sind aber ihre Werke gemacht, nicht bloß erblickt, sondern betrachtet zu werden, lange und wiederholter maßen betrachtet zu werden: so ist es gewiß, daß jeder einzige Augenblick und einzige Gesichtspunkt dieses einzigen Augenblickes, nicht fruchtbar gemacht gewählt werden kann. Dasjenige aber nur allein ist fruchtbar, was der Einbildungskraft freies Spiel läßt. Je mehr wir sehen, desto mehr müssen wir hinzudenken können. Je mehr wir darzu denken, desto mehr müssen wir zu sehen glauben« (*LWB*, 5.2, 32).

10 In his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1769), Lessing states that the »Kunst des Schauspielers stehet hier, zwischen den bildenden Künsten und der Poesie, mitten inne. Als sichtbare Malerei muß zwar die Schönheit ihr höchstes Gesetz sein; doch als transitorische Malerei braucht sie ihren Stellungen jene Ruhe nicht immer zu geben, welche die alten Kunstwerke so imponierend macht« (*LWB*, 6, 210).

11 »In der Stelle jedoch: / Die Stämme sind zu nah gepflanzet, sie / Zerschlagen sich die Äste; – – – / bleibt der einheimische Borg etwas zu sichtbar; denn wer denkt nicht hierbei an den in *Lessings Nathan* mit denselben Worten ausgedrückten Sinn?« (*LS*, 96). I will return to this point in the conclusion of chapter 2.

strategies and examine their dramatic effects.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on the function of the imagination in Lessing's and Kleist's dramatic works, we can glean instructive insights into each author's specific theatrical endeavors. This study seeks to investigate to what extent and in what ways the two dramatists' theatrical experiments hinge on the imagination, how their respective understandings of the imagination differ, and what their divergent dramaturgies of the imagination imply in terms of the broader social and political status of the theater.

### Freedom of the Imagination and the Threat of Prejudice

In order to understand how Lessing und Kleist employ and modify notions of the imagination in their dramatic works, a brief consideration of some of the shifting theories of the imagination in the eighteenth century is helpful. The intricate nexus of the pleasures and constraints of the imagination within aesthetic processes, which Langer builds upon in his review, remains a seminal concern throughout the aesthetics of the Enlightenment, German Sentimentalism, and German Idealism.<sup>13</sup> It implicates a broader set of philosophical questions that pervade eighteenth-century discourses on the imagination, including the tension between sensual and rational cognition, individual imaginative freedom and normative conventions, subjective assessment and communal sense, and, finally, between the notions of private and public.

Informed by Leibnizian tradition, which provided a reevaluation of the epistemological value of sense perception, eighteenth-century theories of the imagination grapple with the mental processes involved in transform-

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12 The term »laboratory« underlines the particular, experimental status the theater assumed in Lessing's and Kleist's work. As Schramm et al. contend in their study *Kunst-kammer, Labor, Bühne*, the experiment, as a form of scientific and scholarly exploration, emerges over the course of the seventeenth century and generates novel interferences between the arts and sciences within various different »Schauplätze des Wissens«. The theater was the showplace *par excellence* to be used as an experimental space or »Experimentalraum«, and it was there that the effects of affects and emotions were first tested and retroactively evaluated, as Clemens Risi demonstrates in regard to seventeenth-century opera (Schramm et al., 147–160). Rainer Ruppert is among the first to draw attention to the experimental status of eighteenth-century theater, which he investigates in terms of a »Labor der Seele und Emotionalität« (20).

13 For a general overview, cf. Schulte-Sasse's entry »Einbildungskraft/Imagination« in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*.

ing perceived external images into internal imaginings.<sup>14</sup> Reviving Aristotle's notion of phantasy<sup>15</sup>, Christian Wolff was among the first to provide a systematic investigation of the faculty of mental representation (*Einbildungskraft*) as a philosophical category.<sup>16</sup> He assigns a place within the system of the mind to the »power of the imagination«, where it is responsible for the storage and reorganization of data.<sup>17</sup> As part of the lower faculties of the mind, the imagination represents a kind of mental visual organ capable of copying previously memorized colors and forms from

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- 14 Spinoza clearly dismisses ideas generated by a merely passive (»patientis«) imagination as false and irreconcilable with rational thought (77). Leibniz also continues to speak of the »imagination« in negative terms. However, he introduces the notion of an instantaneous »idea confusa« (»verworrene Erkenntnis«), which can be developed into a distinct cognition and refers to a pre-rational, spontaneous operation of the mind; this description closely resembles the qualities that Wolff will attribute to the imagination. Beiser argues that Leibniz's notion of *petite perceptions* and the resulting concept of »confused cognition« acknowledges the importance of sense perception for cognitive processes and thus harbors aesthetic implications that eighteenth-century philosophy builds on (31–44). Cf. also Bredekamp; Peres.
- 15 Schulte-Sasse finds that the capacity of phantasia, or imagination, has been disregarded traditionally due to its sensual and visual quality, which he identifies as corporeal and material. For Augustine, for instance, »Die Körperlichkeit der Imagination« means »nicht nur kognitive Unzuverlässigkeit, sondern einen wuchernden, ausschweifenden Einfluß auf alles Seelische« (Schulte-Sasse, 93). Aristotle presents a twofold understanding of the imagination in his seminal treatise *De Anima*. He seeks to account for the position of the imagination between sense perception (the body) and opinion making (the soul): »Denn die Vorstellung ist etwas anderes als Wahrnehmung und Nachdenken, und wie sie selbst nicht vorkommt ohne Wahrnehmung, so gibt es ohne Vorstellung keine Vermutung« (»Über die Seele«, III.3, 54). It is precisely this »obscure« (»unklar«) intermediateness (II.3, 29) between body and soul and thus between instinct and willful control that renders the imagination untrustworthy. Castoriadis emphasizes that »the Aristotelean *phantasia*, in the treatise *De Anima*, covers two completely different ideas«, with the »imitative, reproductive, or combinatory imagination« the idea that is commonly, or primarily, understood, while the second is a radically creative imagination, »without which there can be no thought and which possibly precedes any thought« (136f.).
- 16 The German term »Einbildung« is first used by Meister Eckardt to describe certain profound religious experiences. Luther later adopts the notion and assigns it a crucial function in his homiletics. Cf. Steiger, 107–143, esp. 122–139. In his summary of the conceptual history of *Einbildungskraft* (the *faculty* of imagination), Mattenklott emphasizes the significance of the German term, which stresses the capacity or force of *making* »Einbildungen«, on the one hand, and alludes to the process of internalizing imagery, on the other hand (48).
- 17 Christian Wolff discusses the imagination as a central capacity in the cognitive processing of perception in *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, which was first published in 1719.

sensual perception and rearranging them into new compositions.<sup>18</sup> Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, along with Johann Christoph Gottsched, apply this notion of the active imagination to the poetic arts and explore its productive and creative potential.<sup>19</sup> They do so, however, in distinct ways; whereas Gottsched views the imagination as not much more than a danger to the proper adaptation of poetic rules, Bodmer and Breitinger promote the imagination as »poetic enthusiasm« which enables the creation and reception of prophecies (Dürbeck, 83f.).

While philosophers such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Moses Mendelssohn, and Johann Gottfried Herder will continue to explore the subject's imaginative participation in aesthetic processes, the creative activity or »force« (*Kraft*) which is newly ascribed to the imagination is particularly central to the notion of the »free play of the imagination« (*Einbildungskraft*) that Lessing introduces in his *Laokoon* essay (1766) and Kant develops further in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Lessing draws on the long-established tradition to distinguish the linguistic from the pictorial

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- 18 »Die Vorstellungen solcher Dinge, die nicht zugegen sind, pfliget man Einbildungen zu nennen. Und die Kraft der Seele dergleichen Vorstellungen hervorzubringen, nennet man die Einbildungskraft« (Wolff, § 235, 130). Wolff further defines two kinds of combinatory imagination: A rational, or mathematical, imagination (§ 245f.) and the creative imagination (§ 242f.), which entails »daß wir diejenigen Dinge, welche wir entweder würrklich gesehen, oder nur im Bilde vor uns gehabt, nach Gefallen zertheilen, und die Theile von verschiedenen Dingen nach unserm Gefallen zusammensetzen: wodurch etwas heraus kommet, dergleichen wir noch nie gesehen« (134–136). The latter, which he denounces as »empty«, will later be picked up by Baumgarten and others.
- 19 Gottsched's philosophy, even though explicitly indebted to Wolff, departs from the latter with regard to the epistemological potential of sensual perception in particular. Bodmer and Breitinger, by contrast, developed a theoretical position that was explicitly directed against Wolff and, eventually, also against Gottsched; they advocate a poetics that elicits immediate understanding of (divine) truth, which profoundly informs their notion of the aesthetic function of the imagination as well – a position that Lessing criticized vehemently. Cf. Dürbeck, 77–84; Hermann, 94f. It is important to keep in mind the complexity of the debate as sketched out in Goldenbaum, who makes a strong argument for a more nuanced understanding of the debates surrounding the emergence of aesthetics as inseparable from theological concerns. Goldenbaum presents convincing evidence that the Zurich pietists Bodmer and Breitinger advocated aesthetic experience as a form of religious access to a divine truth just as much as Baumgarten did (36–44). Against this background, it is hardly surprising that Lessing and Mendelssohn polemicalized against what they considered Christian aesthetics based on religious sentimentalism and spoke in favor of a secular investigation of sense perception within cognitive processes in the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff (51).

arts according to their medial and semiotic properties.<sup>20</sup> He investigates these medial differences in an entirely novel way, however, with regard to the two art forms' respective ability to evoke a »free play of the imagination« in the recipients. While Lessing is first and foremost concerned with the pragmatics of the imagination in regards to the reception of concrete works of art<sup>21</sup>, the notion of the »free play of the imagination« has a different meaning in Kant.<sup>22</sup> Kant is mainly interested in the transcendental ends of the imagination.<sup>23</sup> As one of the higher mental faculties, which is nevertheless not a cognitive capacity itself, Kant takes the imagination to be responsible for generating the phenomena (»Erscheinungen«) of external reality, which the mind, in turn, reflects upon. Its role in providing the mind with material to 'work with', as it were, renders the imagination essential for the constitutive experience of human freedom, which, for Kant, is equal to the freedom of the mind.<sup>24</sup>

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20 On the long history of the medial distinction of the arts cf. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon*, 10–17. Markiewicz dates the first written description of the debate about Horaz' notion of *ut pictura poesis* to Dion Chryostomos' first-century account (536–542).

21 Brodsky argues that according to Lessing »imagination left on its own (whatever that would be), without visible »natural signs« to work on, does not so much rise to the heights of ineffable vision as fall back on clichéd images whose already-known quality enforces a lack of imagination and maintains the limits of ignorance« (248). Rothe points out the importance of referentiality for Lessing's understanding of a »free play of the imagination«: »Frei« ist die Einbildungskraft, wenn sie überhaupt wirken und sich entfalten kann. Die Entfaltung aber, das setzt Lessing als selbstverständlich voraus, respektiert einen vorgegebenen Sinn« (25).

22 Kant rarely refers to Lessing explicitly. Yet, as Arnoldt points out, Lessing's prominence and Kant's regular correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn suggest that Kant was familiar with Lessing's seminal treatise (229f.). On the conceptual difference regarding the *free play of the imagination* in Lessing and Kant, cf. Brodsky, 252; Kneller, 23.

23 On the imagination in Kant, cf. Strube.

24 This is the case with purely aesthetic, i.e. non-referential, perception in particular, which liberates the mind from all purposeful constraints and allows the subject to experience and enjoy herself in her full creative capacity, which, for Kant, entails the freedom of self-legislation above all else. In other words, imaginative free play in view of pure, non-referential beauty mobilizes the capacity of the understanding (»Verstand«) to establish formal purposiveness without a purpose. This assumption of purposiveness regardless of any concrete purpose serves as an assurance of the subject's self-legislative power. In the »erste Einleitung in die »Kritik der Urteilskraft«, Kant ascribes the *freedom of legislation* to the »reflective judgment« (»reflektierendes Urteil«) in contrast to the »determining judgment« (»bestimmendes Urteil«) (*KdU*, 432f). In the context of his discussion of the beautiful, Kant defines the *free play of the imagination* in correlation with the activity of the understanding as »Freie Gesetzmäßigkeit« (S71): »Es wird also eine Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz, und eine subjektive Übereinstimmung der Einbildungskraft zum Verstande, ohne eine objektive [...], mit der freien Gesetzmäßigkeit des Verstandes

This focus on the freedom of the imagination appears to stand in tension with one of the Enlightenment's essential goals – namely, the critique and abatement of prejudices. According to Wolff's account of the imaginative capacity and, later, in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the imagination is considered a crucial foundation for generating rational conclusions (»Schlussfolgerungen«). However, in the process of channeling external phenomena and (re)presenting them to the mind (»vorstellen«), the imagination is constantly in danger of misappropriating its object and therefore vulnerable to forming false ideas and premature judgments.<sup>25</sup> Such *preliminary* or *premature* judgments are prone to becoming permanent. In the absence of adequate verification, premature judgments can turn into prejudices that occupy the imagination and, as a result, block the process of free inference, which Rationalist Enlightenment considers seminal for reasonable decisions.<sup>26</sup> This, in turn, raises the question of how the benefits of an active imagination, whose free reflection is deemed essential for the subject's self-constitution, can be reconciled with the permanent risk of creating erroneous opinions and prejudices that might interfere not only with logical thought but, more importantly, with the subject's social reality.<sup>27</sup>

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[...] und mit der Eigentümlichkeit eines Geschmacksurteils allein zusammen bestehen können« (572). See also: »Die ästhetische Zweckmäßigkeit ist die Gesetzmäßigkeit der Urteilskraft in ihrer F r e i h e i t. Das Wohlgefallen an dem Gegenstande hängt von der Beziehung ab, in welcher wir die Einbildungskraft setzen wollen: nur daß sie für sich selbst das Gemüt in freier Beschäftigung unterhalte« (610).

25 Cf. Dürbeck, 29f.

26 Beetz distinguishes the concepts of prejudice as held in the rhetorical tradition and in logic. These different treatments of prejudicial thought call for a more nuanced view of the epistemological and aesthetic function of prejudices or preliminary judgments in Enlightenment literature and philosophy. On the problem of prejudices in early modern thought and in Enlightenment philosophy, cf. Sauder. On the link between *prejudice* and *the imagination*, see Loock, who coins the term »natural prejudice« to refer to a subjective assessment of instances occurring in an objective world (427–430). Cf. also Kehl, 65–99.

27 Eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy developed a fairly nuanced understanding of prejudice as a precondition for decision-making. Rainer Godel emphasizes the ambivalent status of prejudice as a »mode of self-enlightenment in the eighteenth century« (*Vorurteil, Anthropologie, Literatur*, 8). Georg Friedrich Meier, for instance, conceives of the mental representations provided by the imagination as a necessary foundation for the reflections of the mind: »Die dunkle Erkenntnis ist das Chaos der Seele, der rohe Klumpen Materie, den die schöpferische Kraft der Seele bearbeitet, und aus welchem sie nach und nach alle klare Erkenntnis zusammensetzt«. Georg Friedrich Meier, *Vernunftlehre* (1752), § 159, 195. Cited in: Godel, »Eine unendliche Menge dunkler Vorstellungen«, 549.



At this point, we must ask how these theoretical considerations of the possibilities and risks of the imagination translate to the theater, both in theory and in practice. To what extent and in what ways does theatrical representation – that is, the actual phenomenal presence of visible objects and bodies on the stage as well as their actual sounds and voices – challenge the dominant philosophical understanding of aesthetic imagination? How could the presentation of scenes, understood as a set of artistically modeled and clearly defined images, help to mold and regulate the audience's imagination? In what ways does Lessing, for instance, negotiate the tension between a »free play of the imagination« and the danger of premature judgments in his actual plays? What are the implications for the role of the theater within his understanding of enlightenment? In other words, which theatrical strategies might serve the Enlightenment's central aim of liberating the mind from prejudices and constituting self-reflective, socially responsible subjects? What, on the other hand, are the pitfalls and challenges of a liberated spectatorial imagination? In what ways can Kleist's »unbridled« imagination be read as a response to the dangers posed by imaginative free play? And, on this interpretation, what are the dramatic and dramaturgical counterstrategies that he proposes? In pursuing these questions, it is important to keep in mind that the debates surrounding the aesthetic function of the imagination at this time intersected with newly emerging concepts of a social public sphere and were therefore closely connected with reconfigurations of spectatorship.

Comparing the way the imagination functions in Lessing's and Kleist's dramatic work casts new light on the significant shifts that evaluations of the aesthetic imagination underwent over the course of the eighteenth century. The specific role Lessing assigns to the imagination in his plays – namely, to liberate both characters and spectators from normative fixations – corresponds to the central aim of Enlightenment aesthetics, according to which art is meant to serve the recipient's self-education. Half a century later and against the background of the French Revolution, Kleist expresses skepticism toward the idea of an autonomous subject. As we will see, Kleist's so-called »Kant-Krise« can be read in terms of his profound discontent with the notion of a »freely playing« imagination. While Lessing promotes the liberation of the imagination from prejudice as a means of self-enlightenment, Kleist's plays display the potential political shortcomings of private decision-making and revert to a reliance on authoritative leadership instead.



## Theatrical Imagination

Scholarship on the function of the imagination over the course of the long eighteenth century has so far mainly focused on prose and poetry, and it is certainly the case that one of the most basic functions of aesthetic imagination – to bring that which is absent into mental presence – was considered immensely important for the new bourgeois practice of silent reading.<sup>28</sup> As an early representative of the aesthetics of *Empfindsamkeit*, for instance, Johann Jakob Bodmer describes the imagination as »force« (»Krafft«) that allows past sentiments to be recaptured and revived »even in absence« (»auch in der Abwesenheit«), a process that he specifies as »embracing, bringing forth, and waking up« (»annehmen, hervor holen und aufwecken«).<sup>29</sup> In addition to its commemorative function, poetic imagination was considered creative in that it renders present to mind that which is merely *possible*. Both imaginative operations were thought to be crucial for eliciting illusion, immersion, and identification, which were conceived of as fundamental to a literary education, particularly in view of the newly emerging genre of the novel. While the imagination is tasked by literary narrative with the creation of *new* images, its commemorative function allows the synchronization of this newly gener-

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28 Friedrich A. Kittler emphasizes the importance of imaginative processes for the production and reception of literature in the wake of the invention of the printing press, which gives rise to the success of the novel in the eighteenth century (*Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*). Albrecht Koschorke claims that around that time new communal structures emerged from aesthetic processes, including the intimate reading of novels, in the course of which the reader immerses herself in the novel's fictional world (*Körperströme und Schriftverkehr*, 263–322). Koschorke frames the eighteenth-century discourse on the imagination as a »Theorie der Abwesenheit«, since imaginative operations serve to defer presence temporally (274). Benjamin Wishtutz follows a more systematic, media theoretical approach in his book *Theater der Einbildung*, which investigates the imaginative processes at work in theater reception in general. I will rely to his observations on the function of mental representation in terms of the media specificity of the theater occasionally, although I will mostly follow a historical approach, distilling a more specific notion of theatrical imagination from close readings of the historical sources.

29 In *Vom Einfluß und dem Gebrauch der Einbildungskraft* (1727), Johann Jakob Bodmer states: »Darum hat er [Gott, M.W.] die Seele mit einer besonderen Krafft begabet, daß sie die Begriffe und Empfindungen, die sie einmal von den Sinnen empfangen hat, auch in der Abwesenheit und entferntesten Abgelegenheit der Gegenstände nach eigenem Belieben wieder einholen, hervorsuchen und aufwecken kann.« (32).

ated content with the reader's own experiences.<sup>30</sup> The internalization of a text's voice, which previously had typically been read aloud, increases the imaginative scope of the reading experience even further. However, as a few studies have pointed out, the imagination's capacity was also a matter of great concern for the literary theater, which increasingly prevailed at the same time that silent reading became popular.<sup>31</sup> This book focuses on the particular employment of imaginative operations in the theater of that period, the specifics of which are central both to our understanding of the discourse on aesthetic efficacy and pleasure and in regard to viewership practices at the theater. The medial specificity of the theater, which consists in the actual physicality of the action taking place on the stage as well as in the spoken words of the dialogue, shifts the focus of the imaginative operation at work: Liberated from having to *create* images in the mind, the spectators' imagination is free to engage in other ways.<sup>32</sup>

One particularly influential conceptualization of spectatorial imagination at the time (as well as at present) is the idea of a theater of the »fourth wall«, which Denis Diderot introduces in *De la poésie dramatique* (1758).<sup>33</sup> Famously, Lessing translated the treatise into German (»Dramatische

30 Koschorke describes the imaginative processes conceptualized by eighteenth-century aesthetics as acts of »translation«: »Die Einbildungskraft bildet nicht ab, sie übersetzt. Das geschieht physiologisch wie ästhetisch durch den Transfer empirischer Eindrücke in die Konfiguration von Stellvertreterdaten« (*Körperströme*, 297).

31 Schneider applies Koschorke's approach to the theater when he asks how empathy and compassion contribute to the identifying effect of Diderot's dramatic production. Unlike the imaginative effect »provoked by silent reading«, that of theatrical reception »needs to be specified according to the nature of that medium, which is indissolubly tied to orality and physical presence« (*Humanity's Imaginary Body*, 387). Kehl explores the connection between the Enlightenment concept of »Bildung« and the theater in more general terms. Cf. also Rothe, 181f.

32 In his investigation of the media-aesthetic function of the imagination at the theater, Wihstutz (2011) emphasizes the temporal dimension intrinsic to theatrical experience. Far from a medium of pure presence, the theater involves expectations and acts of memory: »Wenn Theaterbilder in der Zuschauerwahrnehmung stets mit Vor- und Nachbildern sowie mit Erinnerungen und Erwartungen verbunden werden und diese zeitliche Syntax überhaupt erst die Wahrnehmung des Bildes ermöglicht, stellt sich zwangsläufig die Frage nach der Funktion der Imagination. Denn Vor- und Nachbilder, Erinnerungen und Erwartungen sind nichts anderes als unbewusste und bewusste Vorstellungen von etwas Abwesendem, die mit dem anwesenden, präsenten Bild der Bühne verknüpft werden. Das menschliche Vermögen, das diesen Vorstellungen zu Grunde liegt, ist die Einbildungskraft« (52).

33 Pavis wrongly claims that the term first appeared in Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (1663) (154), when in fact the quote he refers to comes from Jean Cocteau's *L'Impromptu du Palais Royal*, written almost 300 years later (Double, 9).

Dichtkunst« in *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*, 1760) and, in his preface, professes his admiration for the co-author of the *Encyclopédie* (1751). According to Lessing, Diderot should be viewed as the most philosophical mind to have engaged with the theater since Aristotle (*LWB*, 5.1, 13).<sup>34</sup> Of particular interest for this study – and likely for Lessing as well – is the central role that Diderot assigns to the imagination in his concept of the »fourth wall«:

Man denke also, sowohl während dem Schreiben, als während dem Spielen, an den Zuschauer eben so wenig, als ob gar keiner da wäre. Man stelle sich an dem äußersten Rande der Bühne eine große Mauer vor, durch die das Parterre abgesondert wird. Man spiele, als ob der Vorhang nicht aufgezogen würde (*LWB*, 5,1, 171).<sup>35</sup>

Diderot – here in Lessing's words – attributes this separation between stage and auditorium quite explicitly to an act of mental representation (»sich vorstellen«). Only by being held at an imaginative distance from the live action that takes place on the stage can the spectators be sustained in a state of dramatic illusion, which, to Diderot, is the main purpose of all poetry.<sup>36</sup> The effect of a fictional (»als ob«) distance, which he describes as an intensified or even absolute state of spectatorial »attention« toward the scenic »tableaus« (»Gemälde«) presented onstage, hinges on the imaginative operations of both the dramatist and, implicitly, the spectator.<sup>37</sup> The poet needs to utilize his imagination's »great capacity«, i.e., his capacity to recall previously perceived images<sup>38</sup>, to represent a »gallery of paintings«<sup>39</sup>

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34 On Lessing's reception of Diderot, which was both appreciative *and* critical, cf. Lehmann, *Blick durch die Wand*, 311–322.

35 Translated by Lessing. The French original reads as follows: »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« (Diderot, *De La Poésie Dramatique*, 373, italics mine).

36 »Die Illusion ist ihr [all poetic arts', M.W.] gemeinschaftlicher Zweck« (*LWB*, 5.1., 152).

37 Lehmann points out that »jenes Diderotsche Interesse« derives from a »fiktive Abwesenheitssituation«, which, in turn, entails a dialectical relation between »Beteiligtsein und Unbeteiligtsein« (*Blick durch die Wand*, 147f).

38 »Sie, die Einbildungskraft, ist die große Fähigkeit, ohne welche man weder Dichter, noch Philosoph, weder ein witziger Kopf, noch ein vernünftiges Wesen, noch ein Mensch ist« (*LWB*, 5.1, 155f.).

39 Diderot – again in Lessing's words – describes the poetic act of creating a drama as a mental exhibition of imaginative *paintings*: »Ich präge mir den Gegenstand wohl ein, und bringe ihn in Gedanken von der Natur auf die Leinwand, und untersuche ihn in dieser Entfernung, in welcher er mir weder zu nahe noch zu weit ist. Lassen Sie uns

to his inner eye.<sup>40</sup> The treatise explores the dramatic and theatrical methods necessary for the dramatist who aims to represent these »mental tableaux« onstage in such a way that they leave the strongest of »impressions« on the spectator.<sup>41</sup> Even though Diderot does not spell it out, such »impressions« can be interpreted as particularly strong images that are stored in the imagination – which was previously defined as the mind’s aptitude for managing images – and that may overwrite and become substitutes for previously perceived images.<sup>42</sup> The imaginative »wall« between stage and auditorium thus promises to provide an undisturbed space for theatrical reception in which spectators can attain the state of absolute attention necessary to commit the scenically presented »tableaus« to memory.

Before theorizing the media conditions of dramatic illusion, Diderot dramatized the idea of the »fourth wall« in his play *Le Fils Naturel* (1757). In fact, the framing of the play can be read as an experimental constellation that lays out this concept. The dramatic setting presents the play’s staging as a reenactment of a familial conflict, with the family members playing themselves in their home and the audience reduced to a single spectator. The play thus appears to probe the conditions for and effects of what can be called »theatrical imagination«;<sup>43</sup> Actors and spectators first have to share the same here-and-now of a theater performance in order to

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dieses Hilfsmittel [mental representation, M.W.] hier brauchen. Lassen Sie uns zwei Komödien nehmen, eine von der ernsthaften und eine von der lustigen Gattung; lassen Sie uns von beiden, Scene für Scene, zwei *Gallerien von Gemälden* aufstellen« (LWB, 130, italics mine).

- 40 Lehmann calls this »inszenatorische Imagination« and observes »Diderot imaginiert zunächst den Seelenzustand, die Interessen seiner Figuren und setzt das dann um in den imaginierten Körperausdruck, den er beobachtet« (*Blick durch die Wand*, 150).
- 41 »Nicht Worte, sondern *Eindrücke* will ich aus dem Schauplatze mitnehmen. [...] Das vortrefflichste Gedicht ist dasjenige, dessen Wirkung am längsten *in mir* dauert. O dramatische Dichter, der wahre Beifall, nach dem ihr streben müßt, ist nicht das Klatschen der Hände, das sich plötzliche nach einer schimmernden Zeile hören läßt, sondern der tiefe Seufzer, der nach dem Zwange eines langen Stillschweigens aus der Seele dringt, und sie erleichtert« (LWB, 5.1, 132f., italics mine).
- 42 It can thus be contended that, in addition to Diderot’s introduction of the fourth wall into the poet’s imagination (Lehmann, *Blick durch die Wand*, 151f.), scenic *tableaus* have an imaginative effect on the spectators by leaving enduring imprints on their imaginations.
- 43 »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 imagi-*

establish (imaginative) separation, which in turn enables the individual audience member to (imaginatively) *bridge* that separation and (imaginatively) become part of what is happening onstage. Diderot's notion of the »fourth wall« thus seeks to make the dimension of »fundamental introspectiveness«, which was characteristic of his time, productive for the theater (Bennett, 272).

By proposing such a »theater of the mind« as a secured space in which the imaginative transfer between stage and audience can be channeled in an unobstructed way and regulated at the same time (270), Diderot is responding to centuries-old anti-theatrical sentiments expressed by theater skeptics regarding the visual and corporeal qualities of the art form. It is the theatrical setting as such that anti-theatrical polemics such as Johann Jakob Breitinger's *Bedenken von Comoedien oder Spilen* (1624) and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758) consider the source of potential physical and moral contagion.<sup>44</sup> Not only can disease spread easily in a crowded theater auditorium, but staged immoral behavior may invite imitation. Moreover, the collective experience of the theater and the live quality of the performance pose a constant risk of distraction to the individual spectator, which can thwart a coherent and unified understanding of the diegetic events. By proposing a virtual barrier between stage and auditorium, Diderot responds to such concerns while also countering them. Moreover, once direct interference between stage and audience has been averted, the collective experience at the theater appears to provide the very conditions that most effectively regulate and channel the audience's imagination. The concept of a theater of the fourth wall envisions something like a social or communal mind-set – an »imaginative collective«<sup>45</sup>, as it were – and thereby suggests that imaginative processes in

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nary collective« (Schneider, *Humanity's Imaginary Body*, 387). Cf. also Lehmann, *Blick durch die Wand*, 120ff.; Marshall, 124f.

44 Barish coined the term »antitheatrical prejudice«. In his book of the same title, he investigates the long tradition of antitheatrical sentiment, born out of suspicion of impersonation among philosophers and theologians in particular.

45 According to Schneider, eighteenth-century theater presupposes that stage and spectators are »durch eine vorgestellte Barriere getrennt, die die Zuschauer in ihrer Einbildungskraft überspringen, indem sie sich in die dargestellte Szene versetzen; so entsteht aus einem Raum gemeinsamer *Interaktion* einer der gemeinsamen *Imagination*, die sich zur Imagination von Gemeinschaftlichkeit steigern kann. Es ist also ein genuin ästhetischer Vorgang, der im Theater in die Dimension einer imaginären, abstrakten Gemeinschaft führt« (*Genealogie und Menschheitsfamilie*, 18).