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Of Textual Bodies and Actual Bodies: the Abjection of Performance in Lessing's Dramaturgy

KAREN JÜRS-MUNBY

Proceeding from the observation that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous Hamburgische Dramaturgie (Hamburg Dramaturgy) soon abandons the analysis of actual performances in favour of a discussion of character, the article explores Lessing's problematic relationship with the performing body, situating it in the context of an increasingly textual culture. It shows the implications of this move in terms of gender prescriptions before discussing Lessing's 'disgust' with a particular performance of his Emilia Galotti. Reading this example with Lessing's treatise Laokoon and drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, it argues that Lessing's struggle with the performers reveals a profound crisis in subject formation in the sense that the disturbing corporality of the performing body is always threatening sympathetic identification. The article concludes that the Dramaturgie itself constitutes an 'abjection' of performance. A postscript opens up the view onto the contemporary relevance and refiguration of Lessing's Laokoon in the Laokoon Festival in Hamburg.

The eighteenth-century dramatist, critic, translator and aesthetic theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing sits comfortably enthroned on a pedestal in one of the main squares, the Gänsemarkt, in Hamburg (Fig. 1). This monument to him is the only reminder of a barn-like theatre that once stood here and of the short-lived enterprise of the 'Hamburgische Nationaltheater' (Hamburg National Theatre) from 1767 to 1769, which was the first 'standing' (i.e. non-touring) bourgeois theatre in Germany. Lessing had been commissioned as the in-house playwright and official critic or 'dramaturg' for this enterprise. The other lasting 'monument' – which I would like to study here as a *document*, however – is the resulting famous *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (*Hamburg Dramaturgy*) itself, a text which has been called the 'first book of Moses of German theatre criticism'¹ and which has led theatre historians to inscribe Lessing as the 'first dramaturg'.²

I propose to read this work in the context of a historical transition to an increasingly text-oriented culture with an accelerating book market and a growing reading public (significantly Lessing started his own publishing company to bring out the serialized *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*). The *Dramaturgie* occupied a crucial position in a process which increasingly forced actors to cater to a literary theatre and in which the theatre served as a training ground for potential readers (bearing in mind that even around 1800 about 80 per cent of the German population were still illiterate). Self-disciplined actors like Conrad Ekhof, who studied Lessing's writing on the theatre and founded



FIG. 1 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing on a pedestal in the Gänsemarkt in Hamburg, the site of the *Hamburgische Nationaltheater* from 1767 to 1769. The monument by Fritz Schaper was erected in 1881. (Photo: Hans-Joachim Jürs.)

Germany's first 'Actors' Academy', for their part tried hard to accommodate their art to the new requirements of being judged according to their embodiment of a script, of being physically 'readerly' – and criticizable. In Ekhof's concluding address to his Actors' Academy, he summarized the qualifications actors should bring to their profession:

'namely: reading and writing; a good memory; studiousness; an untiring drive to become ever more perfect; and the strength not to become either proud through flattering praise or frightened through unreasonable reproach'.³

Nowadays, we may (still) take such literacy for granted. Modern actor training assumes the actors' ability to study and memorize text, to follow written stage directions, as well as their willingness to be judged according to the printed play script and to perfect their performances in response to printed reviews. But earlier forms of actor training in Europe put more emphasis on physical agility and virtuosity, stock postures, and proper declamation. Acting in the age of a growing textual culture demanded a complete reorientation. Theoretical writings on the theatre, aesthetic treatises like Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766), and not least of all more elaborate stage directions were increasingly trying to legislate ideal physical representations against which the actual performances were measured. As I shall argue here, these ideal representations were prescribed according to whether or not they allowed for the spectator's subject formation through sympathetic identification with the main protagonists. In this way Lessing attempted to turn the 'gestalt' of the actor into a Lacanian mirror for the spectator, leaving the actor confronting the problem of trying to live up to the critic's demand.

I shall approach the relationship between text, performance, and spectator/reader by way of looking at Lessing's problematic relationship with the performing body. In the first part I explore the ideological implications of the fact that Lessing's later work, especially the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, despite his better intentions, eventually moves away from discussing actual performances. In the second part I discuss Lessing's 'disgust' with one particular performance example (reported to him by Eva König from Vienna) by reading it with Lessing's *Laokoon*, a media-theoretical treatise which in many ways is a companion text to the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. In my analysis I shall be drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as well as recent Kristevan Lessing scholarship. And, finally, I will argue that Lessing's shift away from a discussion of performance can itself be understood as a strategy of abjection designed to subdue the 'disgusting' and disturbing corporeality of the actor. Rather than being just a matter of professional disagreement, I will contend here that Lessing's struggle with the actors and in particular the actresses reveals a more fundamental crisis in aesthetics and subject formation, in the sense that the excesses of the performing body remain a constant threat to the desired subject formation through sympathetic identification.

From actual bodies to textual bodies

But I am again lapsing into the critique of the play, and I wanted to talk about the actor.⁴

My starting point is the curious fact that in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* Lessing soon moves away from discussing actual performances, despite the fact that he had announced that it was to be a 'critical index of all plays to be performed and accompany every step which art, the playwright's as much as the actor's, will take here'.⁵ Especially the actor, Lessing had said, could demand strict and unbiased attention because, unlike the playwright's work which can always be consulted again, 'the art of the actor is transitory

in its works'.⁶ Furthermore, the actor is described as a creative artist in his (sic!) own right and an absolutely vital supplement to the art of the poet: 'He has to think along with the poet; where the poet has met with something human, he has to think for the poet.'⁷

In the comments themselves, however, Lessing increasingly fails to keep up with his critique of the performances, his reviews increasingly lag behind the actual activity of the theatre, and eventually Lessing's *Dramaturgie* covers only the first fourteen weeks of production out of the almost two years of existence of the Hamburg National Theatre!⁸ Moreover, references to the actual performances of specific actors become increasingly sparse and after the twenty-fifth piece cease entirely. Of this part of the task, Lessing admits in the concluding piece, 'I was very soon weary.'⁹ (The German word here is 'überdrüssig' and implies a sense of tired disgust – a response to the actors to which I will return later).

One of the reasons why Lessing stops writing about performances was the resistance of the actors, and particularly the actresses to his critical comments. The actress Susanne Mecour made it a condition of her contract that she should not be criticized at all,¹⁰ while the chief actress of the company, Sophie Friederike Hensel, emphatically resented Lessing's criticism of her physique in the role of Cenie. Lessing had written: 'The actress is too big for the role, I feel like I am watching a giant exercising with the gun of a cadet.'¹¹ Madame Hensel also resented a *lack* of critical mentions and 'insinuated that Lessing paid insufficient attention to the performances of the actors; that he walked restlessly about, or stayed at the buffet while whole acts were being played, only looking now and then through the open door at the parterre'.¹²

Yet, until Lessing's confession at the very end, this tension between Lessing and the actors is all but hidden in the text of the *Dramaturgie*. What reveals it, yet at the same time masks it, is a crucial shift: Lessing resorts to discussing the plays rather than their performances and by a sleight-of-hand discusses dramatic characters *as though* they were performers. So the actor, in the beginning still acknowledged as a co-producer of a play's meaning, has been replaced by his or her double, the character, who is endowed with a virtual, imaginary body and treated as a quasi-material being.¹³ What has happened is that the performer who rules the visual, audible and sensory but, alas, transitory present, has been rendered invisible not only by the playwright but also by the critic, both of whom rule the permanence of the script.

Within the *Dramaturgie* the shift towards a discussion of plays and characters serves the purpose of prescribing ideal representations which would allow for the sympathetic identification of the bourgeois spectator. As I would now like to show, this has ideological consequences especially for the representation of gender roles. For along with the shift from performances to plays, we can observe a semantic and functional shift in Lessing's use of the terms 'natural' and 'nature'. While in the earlier parts the word is used to mean something like 'empirically studied', 'realistic' or 'easily readable', in the later parts it takes on a more ideological connotation, which also has recourse to the early enlightenment meaning of 'nature' as an *a priori* order manifesting divine reason.¹⁴

Thus, for example, when Lessing still considers performances he discusses how an actress playing Elisabeth in Thomas Corneille's *Comte d'Essex* – depending on her

figure, voice, and gaze – could only ever embody either the proud monarch or the tender woman:

Elizabeth is as tender as she is proud; I willingly believe that a female heart can be both at once; but how an actress can represent both equally well is something I do not quite comprehend. In nature itself we do not trust a proud woman to have much tenderness or a tender one to have much pride. We do not trust her to have it, I say, because the signs of the one contradict the signs of the other.¹⁵

Lessing's semiotic argument here is that the performance of pride and tenderness would produce contradictory physical signifiers and therefore would not add up to a coherent, unified reading – even though they may coexist 'in a female heart'.

By way of discussing the physiognomy of potential actresses (Robertson speculates that he has Madame Hensel and Madame Löwen in mind respectively¹⁶), Lessing goes on to ask how an actress could 'go further than nature':

If she is of a majestic build, if her voice sounds fuller and more masculine, if her gaze is bold, her movements quick and valiant, then she will succeed very well in the proud passages; but how about the tender ones? Yet if her figure is less imposing, if gentleness reigns in her mien, a modest fire in her eyes, in her voice more euphony than emphasis, if in her movements there is more decency and dignity than force and spirit, then she will do complete justice to the tender passages; but to the proud ones?¹⁷

Even though the 'proud monarch' is still an option, Lessing already favours the 'tender woman', the gendered portrayal, arguing also that a 'doubling of the male character' has to be avoided:

Essex is proud, and if Elizabeth is to be proud, too, than at least she has to be proud in a different way. If in the earl the tenderness can not but be subordinated to the pride, then in the queen the tenderness has to outweigh the pride.¹⁸

The call for contrasting roles here seamlessly changes into a call for polarized gender characters which reflect but also produce and disseminate the newly emerging polarized gender roles in bourgeois society.¹⁹ Elizabeth is to be seen more in her private sphere of feeling rather than her public role as a monarch. And if one had the choice between an actress who could express 'the offended queen with all her threatening seriousness, with all the terror of vengeful majesty' (e.g. Madame Hensel) or one who could express the 'jealous lover, with all her injured feelings of unrequited love, with all her readiness to forgive the dear offender, with all her anxiety at his obstinacy, with all her woe at his loss' (e.g. Madame Löwen) then surely, Lessing concludes, one would have to go with the latter actress.²⁰ By way of a casting recommendation and censoring of certain imposing bodies, Lessing would thus effect a virtual rewriting of a classical tragedy of revenge and aristocratic power into a sentimental bourgeois tragedy.

By the time Lessing writes about Pierre Corneille's *Rodugune* – in the meantime having given up writing about the performers – he uses the term 'natural' in an outright ideological and normative fashion. Lessing criticizes Corneille for not letting Cleopatra

slay her husband simply out of jealousy, for wanting to make her more 'sublime' by introducing the motif of her ambition to hold on to the throne:

Quite right; far more sublime and – far more unnatural. For to begin with, pride in general is a more unnatural, more artificial vice than jealousy. Secondly the pride of a woman is even more unnatural than the pride of a man. Nature equipped the female sex for love, not for violence; it is to awaken tenderness, not fear; only its charms are to render it powerful; it should rule only through caresses and it should not desire to rule over more than it can enjoy.²¹

The meaning of 'natural' here no longer refers primarily to observable reality but to an abstract ideal or 'rule'. A woman who 'likes ruling merely for its own sake', in whom 'all inclinations are subordinated to ambition', 'such a woman may once have existed, even more than once', Lessing admits, 'but she is nevertheless an exception; and the one who depicts the exception indisputably depicts the less natural'. This 'natural' rule is anchored in 'nature' as a god-given order and biological destiny which 'equips' the female sex with certain traits and for certain tasks ('love'). If Thomas Corneille's Elizabeth was a semiotic monstrosity in her doubleness, then Pierre Corneille's Cleopatra is now 'a monster of her sex'.²²

While Lessing's agenda in these examples is to dismantle the hegemony of French classical tragedy and its absolutist values, the battleground for this ideological quarrel is often the representation and 'nature' of women. The price to be paid for the representation of bourgeois values and for the possibility of the spectator's sympathetic identification with the protagonists is a much more limited gender *and* stage role for women. And although it is no longer the performer but now the playwright who is directly held responsible for the production of meaning, the performer is indirectly censored through the critique of her double, the character.

The *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* is in effect an attempt to rule the 'performance text' (as semioticians are fond of calling the concrete staging²³) from afar through the dramatic text and its dramaturgical interpretation. This desired subordination of the actor to the text is later famously captured by Diderot in the image of the great actor as 'a most ingenious puppet . . . his strings held by the poet who at each line indicates the true form he must take'.²⁴ Diderot goes on to admonish the writers: 'he who leaves least to the imagination of the great actor is the greatest poet'.²⁵ And it is not coincidental that in their own plays Diderot and Lessing (who translated Diderot's early writings into German) for this purpose pioneer very precise prescriptive stage directions for the actors' gestural and mimic play. As a study by Victoria Pfeil has shown, while Lessing's early plays contain fewer and more general stage directions, significantly there is a marked increase in the number and specificity of stage directions in the plays published in the time leading up to the *Dramaturgie*.²⁶

But is the prescription of an ideal staging not inevitably doomed to failure? Will the performer not always threaten to be 'too big for the role'? Will the materiality of body and voice not inevitably exceed the dramatic text when the linguistic sign system of the literary theatre is translated into the sign system of bodies in time and space? Will the performer as the double of the character not return with a vengeance?

There are numerous indications that during and after the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* Lessing becomes increasingly disillusioned with the theatrical embodiment of plays by contemporary performers. He longs for a precise corporeal eloquence ('*körperliche Beredsamkeit*'), a strictly coded art of acting as he thinks the ancient Greeks used to have with their *chironomia*, their 'language of the hands', but 'of this whole language,' he writes in the *Dramaturgie*,

we seem to have retained nothing but an inarticulate screaming, nothing but the power to make movements without knowing how to give these movements a fixed meaning and how to combine them with each other so that they are capable not only of one individual sense but of a coherent meaning.²⁷

Five years later in 1774 he confides to his brother that his intermittent 'little fits of theatre' were usually followed by 'the most extreme disgust at everything that is and is called theatre and theatrical'.²⁸ This repeatedly surfacing reaction of 'disgust' at theatrical representation and its ensuing management through a process of textual transformation and abjection is precisely what I would now like to explore. I would like to contend here that Lessing's disgust with the performers marks a profound crisis in aesthetics and subject formation, in the sense that the material excess of the performing body threatens the spectator's desired subject formation – a process which is at the heart of Lessing's aesthetics of sympathy (*Mitleidsästhetik*).

Abject bodies and disturbed sympathy

A graphic example of a disgust arousing performance is to be found in a letter sent to Lessing from Vienna by his fiancée Eva König in 1772. Complaining about the unbearably 'affected' actor Stephanie in a performance of Lessing's own *Emilia Galotti* she writes:

And what was the last thing he did [as the prince] in your play? He opens his mouth – which is huge anyway – all the way to the ears, mightily sticks out his long tongue from this throat and licks the blood of the dagger with which Emilia has been stabbed. What might he want to achieve with this? Arouse disgust? If that is it, then he has succeeded.²⁹

How could we theorize this example – which among other things further problematizes the gender politics at work in Lessing's relationship with performance? I propose to read this performance example with Lessing's most systematic aesthetic essay, *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (*Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, published shortly before the *Dramaturgie* in 1766), which is essentially a treatise on the aesthetic rules or 'limits' governing the ancient Greek representation of the human body in different artistic media, a treatise aimed at legislating how the body *ought* to be represented by modern artists. These aesthetic rules are intricately bound up with a theory of subject formation, as they articulate when the viewer, reader, or spectator can sympathize and identify with the represented bodies and when this is made impossible by the *way* they are represented. Following on from recent Lessing scholarship by Susan Gustafson and Dorothea von Mücke, but unlike them attending to Lessing in terms of performance rather than literature or literary drama, I shall focus



Fig. 2 The Laocöon group, Vatican museum, Rome. (Photo: private collection.)

on how Lessing deals with the disruptive aspects of corporeality and relate Lessing's aesthetic and dramatic production to Jacques Lacan's theory of subject formation and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection.³⁰

Eva König's description of Stephanie's performance with its focus on the wide-open mouth is most likely deliberately evocative of Lessing's *Laocöon* essay, which not only contains an extensive discussion of disgust but which after all proceeds from a contemplation of how Laocöon's mouth is represented in the ancient Greek statue (see Fig. 2).³¹ By way of looking at this statue Lessing discusses the limits of the visual arts (Lessing calls these 'painting'), which are the medium for the representation of bodies

in space. Because they affect the imagination differently from linguistic representation (which Lessing calls 'poetry'), the medium proper for the representation of bodies in time, the visual arts have to be more restrained and adhere to the laws of beauty. Thus, while Virgil in his poetry can sing of Laokoon's 'terrible screaming', the sculptor does not permit Laokoon's face to show the real intensity of his pain with a mouth wide open. The Greeks, Lessing determines, had wisely decided that the visual arts had to be limited to the representation of beautiful bodies. As Susan Gustafson analyses, 'Lessing attempts to locate in the *Laokoon* essay a classical corporeal ideal. The body sought, like that viewed in Lacan's mirror stage, should evince the sense of a cohesive, structured, namely, Symbolic imago.'³² In turn this imago or 'ideal-I' allows the viewer to (mis)recognize his own cohesion in narcissistic identification.

By extension, these rules are also true for the art of acting and explain Lessing's longing for the actor's 'corporeal eloquence'. The art of acting, as Lessing reiterates in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, is situated in between the visual arts and poetry, it is both 'transitory painting' and 'silent poetry'.³³ But because performance like painting is directly and immediately intuited through the senses, live drama has to adhere more closely to the rules laid down for the visual arts:

The reporting of someone's scream produces one impression and the scream itself another. The drama, designed for living representation by the actor, might perhaps for that very reason have to conform more strictly to material representation in painting. In it we do not merely believe that we see and hear a screaming Philoctetes, we do actually see and hear him. The closer the actor approaches nature, or reality, the more our eyes and ears must be offended; for it is an incontrovertible fact that they are offended in nature itself when we perceive loud and violent expressions of pain.³⁴

And the aggressive offence (German '*Beleidigung*') of eyes and ears is a strict impediment to the imagination's sympathy or pity ('*Mitleid*') with the represented body. Only its beauty can bring about '*Mitleid*' because the latter necessarily has to be coupled with aesthetic pleasure.

Lessing proves this by way of a mental experiment, which turns the Laokoon statue into a virtual performer:

Simply imagine Laokoon's mouth forced wide open, and then judge! Imagine him screaming, and then look! From a form which inspired pity because it possessed beauty and pain at the same time, it has now become an ugly, repulsive figure from which we gladly turn away. For the sight of pain provokes distress; however, the distress should be transformed, through beauty, into the tender feelings of pity.³⁵

As Gustafson's analysis of this passage shows, what is precluding the viewer from sympathetic identification is the intrusion of what Kristeva has termed the 'Semiotic', namely everything which escapes meaning and symbolization and evokes the messy, undifferentiated energies of the body:

Lessing here outlines *in nuce* the essential foundations of his theory of sympathy (subject) formation . . . He envisions the Symbolic function of the law of beauty in the

sublimation of the Semiotic-corporeal pain, in the silencing of the Semiotic scream. Sympathy (subject) formation requires a tempering of the Semiotic (body) by means of the Symbolic (law).³⁶

As both Gustafson and von Mücke show in their respective work, the evocation of Semiotic corporeal content in the work of art – the evocation of the maternal, of horror, imperfection, ugliness, pain, or death – is a necessary part of subject formation. 'Abjection', Kristeva says:

is a *precondition* of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed.³⁷

Because of this fragility of narcissistic identifications the representation of Semiotic content has to be carefully managed in such a way that the imagination can deal with it – either by mixing it with beauty, by a move from image to text (e.g. by describing Laokoon's pain instead of showing it), or by subduing it in the visual representation (e.g. by showing the pain in Laokoon's muscles but not in his face in order to balance beauty and ugliness). In the case of the 'thoroughly abject', however, this is not possible: the horrible or the disgusting ('*das Abscheuliche oder das Ekelhafte*') or outright screaming causes a collapse of the difference between nature and imitation and leads to the real sensation of repulsion and a refusal to identify.³⁸ The 'thoroughly abject' therefore has to be banished from representation altogether.

Let me return now to our disgusting actor in Vienna's *Emilia Galotti* – that 'horrible/revolting fellow, that Stephanie!' ('*der abscheuliche Kerl, der Stephanie!*'), as Lessing calls him in his reply to Eva König.³⁹ Although Stephanie is not screaming, his wide-open mouth in its visual, graphic effect would be offensive in itself. For, as Lessing explains in the *Laokoon*:

The wide-open mouth, aside from the fact that the rest of the face is thereby twisted and distorted in an unnatural and loathsome manner, becomes in painting a mere spot and in sculpture a cavity, with most repulsive effect.⁴⁰

In the live actor the gaping mouth would be even more disturbing as it reveals a visceral inner reality that the outer *gestalt* of the actor should hide: saliva, the tongue, the abyss of the throat. Add to this the sight of blood which, as Lessing explains in the context of a different play in the *Dramaturgie*, must not be shown on stage: 'Pantomime must never be pushed to the disgusting. It is good when in such cases the heated imagination believes to be seeing blood but the eyes must not really see it.'⁴¹

In order to understand the enormity of the actor's insult to Lessing's aesthetics, however, we have to look at the dramatic context in which Stephanie's gestural and facial 'ad-libbing' takes place. *Emilia Galotti*, we remember, is the story of a bourgeois daughter who opts for a sacrificial death at the hand of her father rather than allow herself to be seduced by the prince who abducted her. Gustafson's reading in her book, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, suggests that *Emilia Galotti* is about the abjection

of the maternal Semiotic realm and the reaffirmation of the paternal Symbolic realm. It is Emilia's mother, Claudia, who is responsible for Emilia's absence from the father, for introducing her into urban society and houses of pleasure, and for commissioning the portrait of Emilia which falls into the wrong hands and allows the prince to lay eyes on her. The play works, as Gustafson analyses in detail, to separate Emilia's and the father's self from everything associated here with the maternal body: desire, laughter, characters like the Countess Orsina who represents a massive 'bacchanalian feminine threat' to the patriarchal-Symbolic order⁴² and an unarticulated screaming and verbal erosion that infects all characters in the play. The play's solution to escape this Semiotic chaos is 'to abject the daughter, to articulate with a knife the difference between self (father) and (m)other and to thus reaffirm the paternal fantasy of a virtuous daughter and self-purity'.⁴³

Stephanie's obscene gesture thus occurs at the very moment in the performance when the play has managed an ever-so fragile return to the Symbolic. Stephanie as the prince reverses the father's victory and metaphorically enacts the 'consumption' of Emilia which her death as an 'intact' virgin body was meant to deny him (she died, in Emilia's last words, as 'a rose broken before the storm could defoliate it').⁴⁴ His action of licking the blood off the dagger that just killed Emilia crudely reinvokes the whole Semiotic/maternal content that had just been abjected with great effort. Emilia's 'warm blood', as Gustafson argues with Kristeva, not only 'represents internal desire' (Emilia's and by displacement her father's) but also marks her as a nascent wife and relates her to the contaminating maternal realm:

Blood is specifically that impure feminine element – menses – that is always excluded from the temple. Menstrual blood represents the 'frailty of the symbolic order'. It evokes the 'fear of the archaic mother' . . . Emilia's menses constitutes the most abject element in the play.⁴⁵

And it is this abject element which Stephanie's performance brings to the fore again. In the form of her blood on the dagger Emilia's desire and contamination live on.

Ironically, Stephanie in this way articulates what Gustafson would see as the ultimate truth of the play, namely that Emilia's sacrifice does not actually work to repress the maternal/Semiotic realm which returns to haunt and threaten the Symbolic. Finally, of course, Stephanie's uncalled for action completely detracts the spectator from the sympathetic identification he is meant to undergo, namely that with the father. Gustafson's conclusion that the Semiotic 'scream/laugh pursues the paragons . . . of the patriarchal Symbolic order relentlessly'⁴⁶ in the end might be especially true of the performance dimension of the play.⁴⁷ But this performance dimension, as I will argue by way of conclusion, is somewhat of a blindspot even in Gustafson's argument.

Corporeal eloquence and gestural screaming: Lessing's abjection of performance

With respect to the relationship between text and performance, Gustafson maintains that Lessing 'consistently concentrates on *both* in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*'.⁴⁸ In light of my analysis of the *Dramaturgie*, this statement would have to be heavily qualified:

the actual performance, as I have shown, constitutes a potential threat and reservoir for disgust and disturbance of illusion – even physically driving Lessing out of the theatre. As a discursive analogue to such physical repulsion, Lessing in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* moves to a discussion of *characters* to legislate corporeal performance from afar, according to the laws laid down in the *Laokoon*. His move away from an analysis of actual performance, I would maintain, could itself be read as a ‘strategy of abjection’ which silences the performing body and replaces it with virtual performances in the reader’s mind.

By the end of the *Dramaturgie*, Lessing is ‘weary of’ or ‘disgusted’ with writing about performances. Thus the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* ends with a lament very similar to the one that had once set Lessing on his reform course: ‘We have actors but no art of acting. If such an art existed in former times we no longer have it; it has been lost; it has to be re-invented from the beginning’.⁴⁹ Like the idea of a universal language, the idea of a universally communicable art of acting with ‘specific rules, acknowledged by everybody and composed with clarity and precision’, is nostalgically located in the past and at the same time projected into an indeterminate future.

Laokoon’s scream resurfaces in the *Dramaturgie* as the ‘inarticulate screaming’ of the actors’ gestures, which can never live up to the ideal of a transparent ‘corporeal eloquence’. As in the Laokoon statue, the scream here ‘represents emotion that has not yet acquired (or lost) the meaning and syntax it obtains from the body’.⁵⁰ Rather than support the dramatic text with eloquent ‘silent play’ so that it can attain perfectly ‘natural’ signification, the actors may entirely jeopardize the aesthetics of tragedy: As Lessing complains, ‘through their gestures they ruin everything. They know neither when they have to make any, nor which ones. They usually make too many and too unmeaningful ones’.⁵¹

The power of the actor to evoke the realm of the Semiotic also has to do with the temporality of performance. As the art of acting is located in between the visual arts and poetry, the performer’s tempo, Lessing realizes, can decide whether the effect tends more towards the ‘graphic’ effect of a painting or the successive effect of ‘poetry’:

As visible painting [the art of the actor] certainly has to have beauty as its highest law; but as transitory painting it does not always have to give its postures that calmness which makes the ancient works of art so impressive. It may, it must at times allow itself the wildness of a Tempesta, the insolence of a Bernini; in [the art of acting] this has all the expressiveness that is peculiar to it without having the offensiveness that it obtains in the visual arts through the permanent posture. Only [acting] must not remain in it for too long; only it must prepare it through the preceding movements and through the following resolve it into the general tone of decency; only it must not give it all the strength to which a poet can drive it in his treatment of it.⁵²

While Lessing clearly admires the way the actor can make paintings move, this passage with its many qualifiers (‘only . . . only . . . only’) clearly bears witness to the dramatist’s anxiety about what the actor might do with the script. Unlike in the process of reading where the reader controls the speed of reading, in performance it is the performer who controls the speed of ‘reception’ and the duration of signs. As Lessing laments, the

playwright does not have a system of notation for the timing of movement⁵³ and is ultimately at the mercy of the performer.

Furthermore it is ultimately the live co-production of the performers and audience who determine the process of reception and the meaning of a performed play,⁵⁴ so it comes as no surprise that the audience for Lessing is not to be trusted either:

The gallery is, of course, a great lover of everything noisy and raging, and they will rarely fail to respond to a good lung with loud hands. The German pit as well is still pretty much of this taste, and there are actors who are clever enough to know how to take advantage of this taste. The most sleepy actor pulls himself together when he is meant to make his exit, suddenly raises his voice and overloads the action without considering whether the meaning of his speech really demands this heightened effort. Often enough it even contradicts the state in which he is meant to depart; but what is it to him? Enough that he has thus reminded the pit to notice him, and if it would please be so good as to applaud him.⁵⁵

The cardinal collective sin of audience and actor here is that they call attention to the actor as an acting body and to themselves as bodies in the audience. Lessing's (as well as Diderot's) dramaturgy, however, demands that the beholder and the actor, that theatre itself can be forgotten – a forgetting that Lessing himself effects in the text of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* by silencing the performing body.⁵⁶ But will it keep quiet?

Postscript

Since 2001 the annual international summer theatre festival at the Kampnagel site in Hamburg has been reinvented as the 'Laokoon Festival'. With this title the organisers are deliberately referring to Lessing's theoretical essay on the expressive powers and effects of different artistic media arguing that 'in an age when the theatre moves seemingly randomly between the arts and helps itself now here now there, Lessing's *Laokoon* text raises questions that are highly topical for the development of contemporary theatre'.⁵⁷

In 2002, when the festival's theme was 'History and Memory in the Age of Globalisation', its poster irreverently depicted the Laokoon statue on a paper plate with Laokoon and his sons being strangled by spaghetti instead of giant snakes (see Fig. 3). To some commentators this signified the dangers of globalization. Thus Evelyn Finger commented in *Die Zeit*:

Spaghetti are the ties of the banal, they symbolize the ancient Greeks being threatened by the Italian kitchen or else the endangerment of cultural achievement through satisfaction of the drives (*vulgo*: stuffing yourself), in any event an unstoppable massification.⁵⁸

Finger went on to argue that the task of the Kampnagel festival programme was to develop a 'counter programme to the noodle-fication', that is, the undifferentiated conformity of the world. With this analysis of the festival poster, *Die Zeit* thus automatically reproduced the gesture of 'abjection' that is embedded in Lessing's *Laokoon* treatise. Anything that threatens the (classical, western) individual in his subject formation is to be fought off.

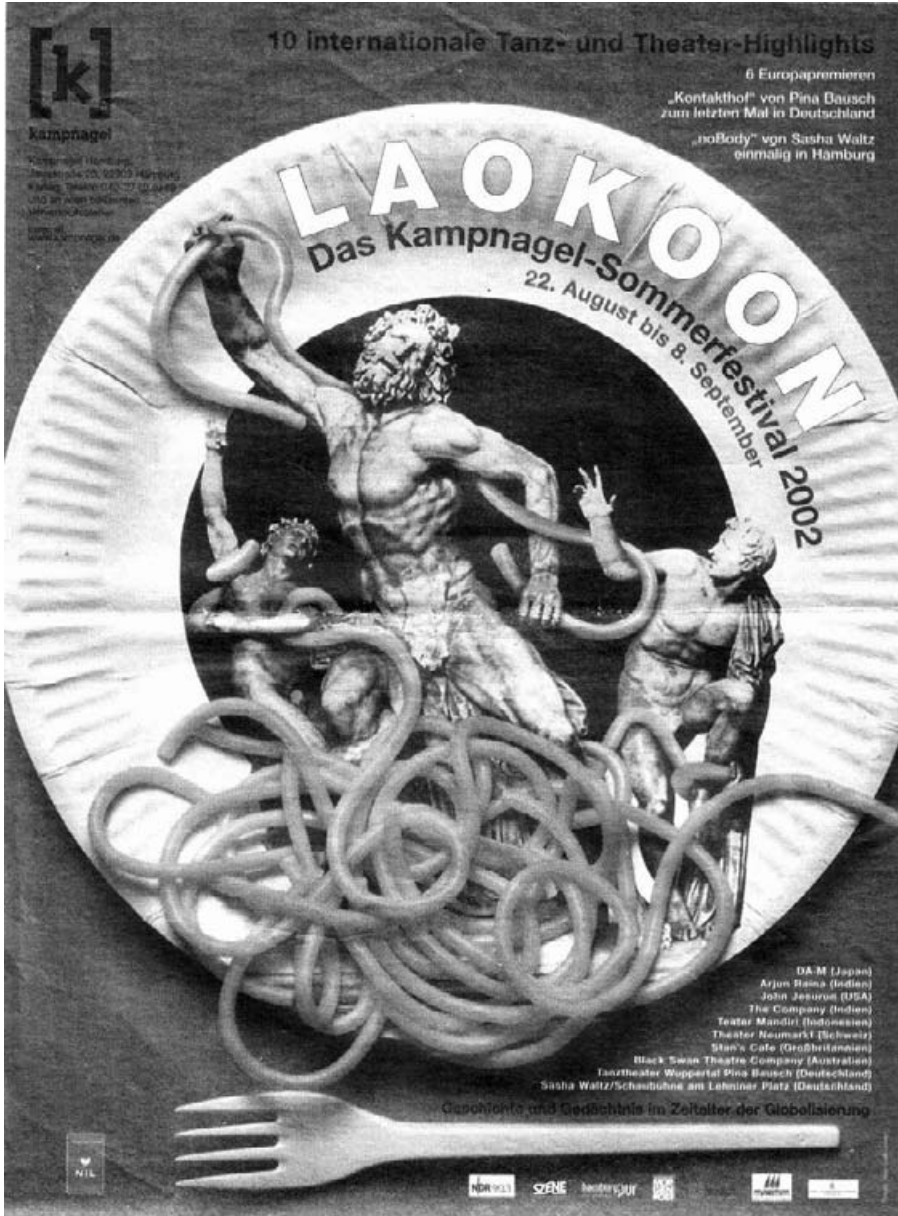


Fig. 3 Poster motif for the Kampnagel Summer Festival LAOKOON in 2002. (Reproduced from the title page of the *Hamburger Morgenpost* festival supplement with kind permission by Kampnagel, Hamburg.)

Instead one could suggest a more optimistic reading of the festival poster, which takes account of its ironic, pastiche character. Laocöon – the statue as much as Lessing's treatise – is here gleefully confronted with the messiness of the Kristevan Semiotic. By being served up this image on a plate, the festival visitor is invited to indulge in

the 'messy' pleasures of performance, which in this 'postdramatic' age has once again regained prominence and presence, having emancipated itself from the dominance of the text and the pressures of mimetic representation.⁵⁹ The poster could be seen to invite a direct sensory engagement and possibly even – Brecht forbid! – a new kind of 'culinary' attitude to the performances on offer. And just as Jatinder Verma states (with reference to the culinary revolution in Britain over the last thirty years) that 'the development of multiculturalism is being led by the stomach',⁶⁰ the real-live meeting of spectators and performers in intercultural festivals like these, while always running the risk of 'orientalism', may ultimately invite the genuine encounter of difference and alterity and even hold out the challenge of 'embracing the other', which Verma identifies as the major challenge of the twenty-first century. Food for thought . . .

NOTES

- 1 Dieter Hildebrandt, *Lessing: Biographie einer Emanzipation* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1979), p. 9. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, fourth edition (Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon, 1982) p. 396.
- 3 Conrad Ekhof, 'Journal der Akademie der Schönemannschen Gesellschaft' (1753), in Heinz Kindermann, ed., *Conrad EkhoFs Schauspielerakademie* (Vienna: R.M. Rohrer, 1956), pp. 39–40.
- 4 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II (Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1959), 2. Stück, p. 341. For an existing translation see G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, translated by Helen Zimmern (c. 1890), with a new introduction by Victor Lange (New York: Dover Publications, 1962). By the editor's own admission this republished translation 'is somewhat archaic and the translator has omitted a few brief passages, though none of great importance' (p. xxi). Crucially, these 'unimportant passages' suppressed in the nineteenth-century translation are sometimes precisely the ones in which I am interested here. So while I have consulted Zimmern's translation, I have preferred to use my own.
- 5 *Ibid.*, *Ankündigung* (Announcement), p. 331.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- 8 See J.G. Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), pp. 127–9. Lessing's failure to keep up with the reviews of the plays was exacerbated not only by the breakneck repertoire of the Hamburg National Theatre but also by the fact that the installments of the *Dramaturgy* were soon reprinted by pirate publishers, making him reluctant to produce more.
- 9 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 101/102/103/104. Stück, p. 758.
- 10 Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory*, p. 38.
- 11 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 20. Stück, p. 415.
- 12 Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory*, p. 126, footnote 2.
- 13 I owe this insight to a seminar presentation by Leigh Clemons at the University of Minnesota in which she said: 'where one cannot speak of acting, the character produces its own materiality, and is discussed as a material being'.
- 14 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Kurze Geschichte des deutschen Theaters* (Tübingen and Basel: Franke Verlage, 1993), p. 116, where she is referring to the philosophical school of Christian Wolff.
- 15 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 25. Stück, p. 435.
- 16 Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory*, p. 36.
- 17 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 25. Stück, p. 435.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 437.
- 19 As Karin Hausen has argued, the polarization of gender characters mirrors the social development of a dissociation of (public) working life from (private) family life in the eighteenth century. See Karin

- Hausen, 'Die Polarisierung der "Geschlechtscharactere": Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben', in Werner Conze, ed., *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), pp. 363–93.
- 20 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 25. Stück, p. 437.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 30. Stück, p. 457.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 I would actually like to question the assumption of theatre semiotics that performances automatically function like 'texts' and that spectators are a kind of 'reader'. A document like the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* might instead show us that actors and spectators were gradually taught to treat the attendance of a play more like an act of reading, i.e. not to let their corporeal presence impinge too much on the performance and reception of the playscript. With additional innovations such as the darkening of the auditorium, spectators increasingly became immobilized 'docile bodies' (Foucault).
- 24 Denis Diderot, 'The Paradox of Acting' ('Le Paradoxe sur le comédien'), translated by W.H. Pollock in *The Paradox of Acting and Masks and Faces* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 46.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Victoria Pfeil, *Lessing und die Schauspielkunst: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der unmittelbaren Bühnenanweisung* (Darmstadt: Roetherdruck, 1924), p. 24.
- 27 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 4. Stück, pp. 345–6.
- 28 Lessing in a letter to his brother Karl, 2 February 1774, as cited in Thomas Dreßler, *Dramaturgie der Menschheit: Lessing* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996), p. 328 (my translation).
- 29 Eva König writing to Lessing, 15 July 1772, in *Lessings Werke and Briefe*, edited by Wilfried Barner, et al., 12 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1885–2000), vol. x1/2, p. 442.
- 30 Susan E. Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers: Narcissism and Abjection in Lessing's Aesthetic and Dramatic Production* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995) and Dorothea von Mücke, 'The Powers of Horror and the Magic of Euphemism in Lessing's "Laokoon" and "How the Ancients represented Death"', in Veronica Kelly and Dorothea von Mücke, eds., *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 163–80.
- 31 According to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Laokoon was a Trojan priest who, against the will of the gods, warned the Trojans not to accept the wooden horse from the Greeks. As a punishment by Poseidon he and his sons were strangled by giant serpents. The famous marble group depicting this moment, described by Pliny as 'the greatest perfection in art' and attributed by him to Agesandros and his sons Athenodoros and Polydoros of Rhodes (c. 50 BC), was rediscovered in Rome in 1506 and is now kept at the Vatican museum.
- 32 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 42. She is referring to Kristeva's not Lacan's Symbolic, i.e. it does not just comprise of language but can also consist of physical order or an ordered, meaningful body language.
- 33 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 5. Stück, p. 353.
- 34 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, translated, with an introduction and notes, by Edward Allen McCormick (1963) (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 24.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 36 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 78. Note: Kristeva's concepts of the 'Semiotic' and the 'Symbolic' should not be confused with the general terms 'semiotic' and 'symbolic'. Following Gustafson I therefore always capitalize Kristeva's terms.
- 37 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 13.
- 38 Compare Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, especially pp. 83–5, and Dorothea von Mücke, 'The Powers of Horror and the Magic of Euphemism', especially pp. 166–7.
- 39 Lessing to Eva König, 29. July 1772, *Lessings Werke und Briefe*, vol. x1/2, p. 447.

- 40 Lessing, *Laocoön*, p. 17.
- 41 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 9. Stück, p. 369.
- 42 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 188.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- 44 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Emilia Galotti* (Reclam: Stuttgart, 1975), Act v, sc. vii, p. 78.
- 45 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 201.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 47 The disgust with Stephanie's rude action would inevitably also tip over into involuntary laughter as a defence mechanism in the audience. Such unprogrammed laughter is well documented about other performances of *Emilia Galotti* as well. Especially the father's response to Emilia when she demands to have the dagger, 'Child, it's not a hairpin!' apparently caused a lot of involuntary laughter and disturbed the illusion. See Wilfried Barner, *et al.*, *Lessing: Epoche – Werk – Wirkung* (Munich: Beck, 1987), pp. 361–2.
- 48 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 39 (emphasis added).
- 49 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 101/102/103/104. Stück, p. 758.
- 50 Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, p. 62.
- 51 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 3. Stück, p. 344.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 5. Stück, p. 353.
- 53 See Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 8. Stück, p. 365.
- 54 On the difference between reading and spectating in the theatre see, for example, Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, second edition (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 20–1.
- 55 Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 5. Stück, p. 354.
- 56 There are also indications that Lessing was no longer willing to run the risk of performance with his later plays. Victoria Pfeil's study of Lessing's stage directions cited earlier also found that his later plays showed a drastic reduction in stage directions. See Pfeil, *Lessing und die Schauspielkunst*, p. 43. Significantly Lessing's last play, *Nathan the Wise*, is called a 'dramatic poem'. In light of the media distinctions drawn in the *Laokoon* this would indicate that the ideal audience member for this play is more of a reader/listener than a spectator at a live performance.
- 57 'Warum Laokoon?', Laokoon festival supplement (in conjunction with Hamburger Morgenpost, Hamburg, 21 August 2002), p. ii.
- 58 Evelyn Finger, 'Spaghetti's erwürgen Laokoon' in *Die Zeit*, 36/2000. Available at http://www.zeit.de/2002/36/Kultur/200236_laokoon.html.
- 59 See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main, Verlag der Autoren, 1999), English translation by myself forthcoming with Routledge.
- 60 Jatinder Verma, 'Sorry, No Saris', in Vera Gottlieb and Colin Chambers, eds., *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1999), p. 197.

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