

**Theatrical Techniques of Political Mobilization
in Heinrich von Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug* (1806)**
Mimmi Woisnitza (University of Chicago, Germanic Studies, ABD)

Recently, I came across some graffiti in Basel that struck me as an interesting starting point for my remarks since it leads straight to the heart of this conference's topic. The spray-painted phrase read as follows: "Revolution is Great, Everything Else is Art." What we have here is a quite negative assertion of the function of art with regard to actual political and social reality. In other words, art does everything but change society. I figure that it is exactly this distinction between political action and the realm of aesthetics and art suggested by this rather pessimistic point of view that we have sought to reinvestigate over the last one and a half days. To what extent can the theory and practice of art actually affect the formulation of political intent or even the mobilization of political action?¹

My paper sets out to historicize the concept of 'revolution' as we know it today, namely as a collective and popular socio-political movement, by shifting the focus backward about two hundred years. I will look at the dramaturgical and theatrical techniques that the Prussian dramatist Heinrich von Kleist employs in his 1806 comedy *The Broken Jug*. I read Kleist's piece as a response to the quite urgent political challenges going on at the time of the Napoleonic wars that eventually lead to the defeat of Prussia in 1806. I will proceed in three argumentative steps:

1) Since Kleist's comedy deals with the aftermath of the French Revolution, which theories of revolution usually consider the point of origin for the modern sense of revolution. I

¹ Terry Eagleton, "Conclusion. Political Criticism," *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996 (2nd Edition), pp. 169-189, p. 169.

will start looking at the emergence of this understanding of modern revolution as a socio-political upheaval that involves a radical reform of society as a whole and the ensuing transformation to culture and thought. 2) As I will show, Kleist's *The Broken Jug* alludes to the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars by way of historical analogy to the Dutch Revolt against Spain between 1568-1648. 3) Finally, I argue that by making use of particular theatrical techniques, Kleist's piece negotiates the status of cultural and political history and historical time for political resistance; that is it attends to the relation of past and future that poses a challenge for any revolutionary movement.

1) The historicity of concepts of 'revolution'

In his book *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Times*, first published in German in 1979,² Reinhart Koselleck draws a remarkable analogy between the conceptual change the notions of history (in German *Geschichte*) and of revolution underwent in the course of the eighteenth century. The analogy implies an intrinsic interdependency of the concepts of history and revolution. The development of both concepts, Koselleck argues, involves a "philological shift" away from the cyclical motion of repetition; a shift that historically coincides with the era of the French Revolution. Before 1750 and since at least the Greco-Roman times, "Geschichte" or history did not exist in today's singular and totalizing sense, but referred to one account of an event among others ("Geschichten"). These *historiae* served as examples for current or future situations. Such an understanding of history as the instructor of life (*historia magistra vitae*) presupposes the repetitiveness of history.³ During the second half of the eighteenth century, this cyclical, repetitive motion of histories, which provide exemplary foils, is

² I draw on Koselleck's two essays "Historia Magistra Vitae. The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process" and "Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution," two chapters of Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Times*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2004, (1979 in German), pp. 26-57.

singularized into the concept of one history (“die Geschichte”) as a linear, future-oriented and thus progressive development of humanity. Or, as Hegel summarizes this central position of enlightened Idealism in his famous inversion of historical cyclicity: “What we learn from history is that we do not learn anything from it.”⁴

As Koselleck shows, in pre-Enlightenment times, the term “revolution” had also been understood as a cyclical motion. Since the Middle Ages, the term *re-volutio* had described the orbits of stars and planets around the sun as a cyclical movement with an eventual return to its point of departure (what Copernicus called *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*). Applied to the political sphere, revolution defined the change and transformation of political systems within a predetermined range of possible models without touching upon the status quo of the estates of the realm.⁵ It is not until the socio-political upheavals in the second half of the eighteenth century that the term “revolution” takes on its modern sense of a radical socio-political and cultural change.⁶

From what I just delineated, the eighteenth-century concepts of history and revolution seem to be closely interrelated. The radical disruption of social reality following the French Revolution marked a historical event that could not simply be integrated into a cyclical understanding of history anymore, but instead called for its revision. A fact that most concisely manifests this revision of history is the introduction of the French Republican

³ Cf. also Gerald A. Press, “History and the Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity” *History and Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), pp. 280-296, p. 281.

⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, held at Humboldt University in Berlin between the years 1821 and 1831, posthumously published in 1837.

⁵ For the cyclical notion of political revolution in Greek and Roman antiquity see also Bernard Cohen, “The Transformation of the Concept of Revolution,” in, *ibid.*, *Revolution in Science*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 49-76, pp. 53ff. Cicero, for instance uses the terms *orbis* or *conversio* to describe the change of political system (p. 55). The term “*revolutio*” as such did not emerge until the Latin-Middle Ages, where it was used by Martenius Capella and Augustine in the sense of *conversion* (p. 56).

⁶ Cf. Koselleck, p. 56.

Calendar which signifies an end of the common course of history and the beginning of a new course of times.

2) Political allusions in Kleist's *The Broken Jug*

Kleist's comedy *The Broken Jug* was conceived in the years between 1802 and 1806, that is shortly after Napoleon Bonaparte took over political control of the newly founded First French Republic, which in 1804 was turned into the French Empire with Napoleon's self-coronation as Emperor. At the time Kleist finished the play in 1806, he served as public servant for the Prussian king Frederick William III in Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia and the seat of the leading political reform movement of the Prussian state. Particularly since Napoleon's invasion of Vienna in 1805, Prussia faced the immediate threat of a French occupation, which eventually took place after the siege of Jena in 1806. That the political changes in France and all over Europe affected Kleist can be inferred from two letters he wrote to a friend in 1805 and 1806, in which he reframes Napoleon as the "evil spirit of the world."⁷

In the following, I propose reading Kleist's *Broken Jug* against this political background. Kleist's comedy—set in a seventeenth-century village near Utrecht, then part of the Dutch Republic—offers a clear political allusion to the Dutch Wars of Independence between 1568-1648, which, as Wolf Kittler has demonstrated, can be read as a historical analogy to the situation in Prussia in the early 1800s.⁸ This mode of historical reference, as I will show, takes up on the pre-modern cyclical historicity but eventually goes beyond it. The jug, the brokenness of which constitutes the legal matter around which the court drama revolves, was

⁷ Kleist's worries about the "evil spirit of the world" recalls Hegel's 1806 rendering of Napoleon Bonaparte as "world spirit on horseback." Both quotes suggest that the fashioning of Napoleon as "Weltseele" or "Weltgeist" was a common expression at the time.

⁸ Cf. Wolf Kittler, *Die Geburt des Partisanen aus dem Geist der Poesie. Heinrich von Kleist und die Strategie der Befreiungskriege*, Freiburg: Rombach 1987.

decorated with the depiction of a significant historical event, namely the ceremony in 1555 at which Charles V—Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire—hands over the Dutch Provinces to his son Philip II—King of Spain. This event marked the beginning of Philip’s tyrannical hegemony over the Netherlands. However, it also launched a fierce and tireless struggle of the Dutch people that eventually lead to the foundation of the independent Dutch Republic in 1581 which was however not recognized by the Spanish Empire until the peace of Westphalia some sixty years later. In other words, the jug’s illustration represents the image of the oppressor, which, at the same time, signifies the shared cause for a relentless resistance that lasted eighty years. In short: to the characters of Kleist’s play the jug represents the image of a shared enemy.

Notably, the Dutch Insurgence against Spain had served as an important dramatic topos before Kleist, namely in Schiller’s *Don Carlos, Infant of Spain* (1787) and Goethe’s *Egmont* (1788). Moreover, in his treatise on the history of the Dutch Independence from 1789—notably the year of the storming of the Bastille, Schiller explicitly declares the Dutch resistance to be an exemplary model for as he puts it “similar situations” [SLIDE 2. This is my first Quote—the German is first and the English translation you find below—please note the phrase: “Wenn die Zeitläufte wiederkehren” (when the course of time repeats itself) which invokes cyclical historicity—notably Schiller’s treatise is assumed to have been a likely source for Kleist’s comedy].⁹ That is to say, for Goethe and Schiller the Dutch struggle for

⁹ “Als ich vor einigen Jahren die Geschichte der niederländischen Revolution unter Philipp II. in Watsons vortreflicher Beschreibung las, fühlte ich mich dadurch in eine Begeisterung gesetzt, zu welcher Staatsactionen nur selten erheben. Bei genauerer Prüfung glaubte ich zu finden, daß das, was mich in diese Begeisterung gesetzt hatte, nicht sowohl aus dem Buche in mich übergegangen, als vielmehr eine schnelle Wirkung meiner eigenen Vorstellungskraft gewesen war, die dem empfangenen Stoffe gerade die Gestalt gegeben, worin er mich so vorzüglich reizte. (...) Das Volk, welches wir hier auftreten sehen, war das friedfertigste dieses Welttheils, und weniger als alle seine Nachbarn jenes Heldengeists fähig, der auch der geringfügigsten Handlung einen höheren Schwung giebt. Der Drang der Umstände überraschte es mit seiner eigenen Kraft, und nöthigte ihm eine vorübergehende Größe auf, die es nie haben sollte, und vielleicht nie wieder haben wird. Die Kraft also, womit es

independence had arguably served as a historical model in the wake of the increasing socio-political unrest in France that eventually lead to the French Revolution. [SLIDE 3

3) And this will be the last step of my argument, the theatrical techniques of political mobilization in *The Broken Jug*

However, as most of you surely remember, in Kleist's comedy, the jug, and with it the image of the shared enemy, has been shattered by Adam, the village judge. Ex officio, Adam is supposed to guarantee justice and truth, but instead he neglected his duties for the sake of private desires. – Here we have the conflict between private interests interfering with public concerns – In order to get intimate with the farmer's daughter Eve, Adam blackmails her by inventing a fictional conscription order, according to which Eve's fiancé Ruprecht would not be sent to war against Spain – as planned – but would be summoned to the murderous colonial war in the West Indies instead. Adam also pretends to be able to prevent Ruprecht from being drafted. That is to say, Adam's shattering of the jug as symbol of collective resistance goes along with the obfuscation and undermining of a collective political goal – the fight against the Spanish crown – as well as with the shattering of the other characters' trust in the legal and political authority of the state. Yet Kleist's piece, I argue, proposes a restoration of both – the shared goal and the trust in political authority – by way of a particular theatrical technique which I want to call *theatrical imagination*; a technique that involves the stage-audience relation by making use of the particular media logics of the theater between what is visibly represented onstage and what is evoked imaginatively by the dramatic dialogue.

handelte, ist unter uns nicht verschwunden; der glückliche Erfolg, der sein Wagestück krönte, ist auch uns nicht versagt, wenn die Zeitläufte wiederkehren und ähnliche Anlässe uns zu ähnlichen Thaten rufen." Friedrich Schiller, "Geschichte des Abfalls der Vereinigten Niederlande," in *ibid.*, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*. XII vols. Frankfurt am Main: Bibliothek Deutscher Klassiker, 1988, pp. XX-XX, pp. Xff.

Asked by the judge to present the legal matter of the broken jug, Eve's mother, Marthe Rull famously declares that due to its brokenness the jug "cannot be seen." That is to say, the play's 'dramatic as well as its legal matter literally remains invisible, i.e. it evades the spectacle and thus the *theatrical* view. Instead, the jug's presence is evoked imaginatively through Marthe's ekphrastic description [SLIDE 4. This is the second Quote, unfortunately I don't have an English translation for the quote, my apologies].¹⁰ As Dorothea von Mücke recently observed, Marthe's jug speech consists of two parts. The first part is Marthe's description of what had been depicted on the jug.¹¹ The way in which she describes it, von Mücke argues, quasi reenacts the jug's shattered-ness. The second part is Marthe's account of the history of the jug's possession, which narrates the shift of the jug's symbolic value. While it can be presumed that the jug was initially manufactured as a souvenir of the Spanish hegemony over the Netherlands, as it changed hands during the war it turned into a symbol of resistance. The fact that the jug remained in one piece despite all the turmoil surrounding it can be read as the cohesiveness of the historical legacy it represented. Taking up on von Mücke's observations, I suggest that for such a two-sided effect, namely the shattered-ness of the original meaning on the one hand and the persistence of the historical legacy of political resistance on the other hand, the mediatization through an imaginative technique is crucial. Only by evoking the jug's

¹⁰ Dorothea von Mücke argues that Marthe's speech features two parts: "The first narrative or "The Fragmented Picture" suggests that the work of art no longer exists as a totality representing a unified historical *status quo* (...). The second narrative--what I have called "The History of the Whole Pitcher"--suggests instead of a unified picture of a historical epoch, a complex, heterogeneous, willfully appropriated, constructed object that stands in for the unity between an official history or *grand récit* and popular practices of commemoration." Cf. Dorothea von Mücke. "The Fragmented Picture and Kleist's Zerbrochener Krug," in *Heinrich von Kleist and Modernity*, Bernd Fischer; Tim Mehigan (Eds.), Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011, pp. 41-53, p. 51.

¹¹ „Nichts sehr ihr, mit Verlaub, die Scherben seht ihr; / Der Krüge schönster ist entzwei geschlagen. / Hier grade auf dem Loch, wo jetzo nicht, / Sind die gesamten niederländischen Provinzen / Dem span'schen Philipp übergeben worden. / Hier im Ornat stand Kaiser Carl der fünfte: / von dem seht ihr nur noch die Beine stehn. / Hier kniete Philipp, und empfing die Krone: / Der liegt im Topf, bis auf den Hinterteil, / Und auch noch der hat einen Stoß empfangen. (...)" (SWB, I, 311 (646-656)).

two-sided historicity in the characters' as well as the spectators' imagination can its seemingly paradoxical status be brought into full effect.¹² [SLIDE 5]

However, on the level of the plot, this persistence of the historical legacy via Marthe's imaginative evocation is not sufficient. In other words, Marthe's account of the jug's political value is of no effect to the other characters. Instead, the jug remains shattered, and with it the characters' trust in the shared resistance against the Spanish crown. In order to restore that trust, Kleist's piece makes use of another token of symbolic investment. In the last scene of the comedy's original longer ending, the Judicial Council Walter who eventually convicts Adam employs a coin in order to legitimate his authority. Walter tries to convince Eve and her fiancé Ruprecht of Adam's false play, and of the fact that Ruprecht is not going to be sent to the West Indies but will rightfully fight against the Spaniards; yet his attempts to convince them only succeed when he shows them a coin figuring the head of Philip of Spain. Kittler suggests to read the coin scene in reference to the Dutch "Geusenpfennig" (*beggar's penny*),¹³ which during the Dutch War of Independence served as a shibboleth by figuring Philip's II head as the symbol of a shared enemy. Notably, an important source for this reference is again Schiller's above-mentioned historical treatise about the Dutch struggle of independence [SLIDE 6. note the negative signification of the coin – the image of Philipp II serves as a token for collective resistance against him].¹⁴ On the level of the plot, the coin in *The Broken*

¹² Von Mücke points out that Marthe's "question as to whether the court can actually see the jug (...) draws attention to the physical object of which only shards are left, in order then to draw attention to her speech as a verbal, poetic construct that by way of its illusionary technique can produce an ideational object for the imagination of her listeners in lieu of the actual one." (p. 45).

¹³ Cf. Kittler, pp. 98ff.

¹⁴ The "Geusenpfennig" is also celebrated by Schiller in his treatise *Geschichte über den Abfall der Niederlande* that I mentioned above. It is unlikely that Kleist was unaware of this text. "Das Daseyn seiner Beschützer mußte dem Volke versinnlicht, und der Eifer der Parthey durch ein sichtbares Zeichen in Athem erhalten werden; dazu war kein besseres Mittel, als diesen Namen der Geusen öffentlich zur Schau zu tragen, und die Zeichen der Verbrüderung davon zu entlehnen. (...) Um den Hals hiengen sie eine goldene oder silberne Münze, nachher der Geusenpfennig genannt, deren eine Seite das Brustbild des Königs zeigte, mit der Innschrift: Dem Könige getreu. Auf der andern sah man zwei zusammengefaltete Hände, die eine Provianttasche hielten, mit den Worten: Biß zum

Jug thus can be said to function as a re-appropriation of the jug's symbolic investment, i.e. as a reminder of the shattered political cause. [SLIDE 7] This reading, I suggest, allows for a historical analogy to be drawn between the Dutch wars of independence and the Napoleonic wars ongoing during the comedy's time of production. The coin-scene in *The Broken Jug* arguably relates to Kleist's contemporary audience insofar as Napoleon Bonaparte's head had been minted on numerous coins since he took over office as first council in 1799 [SLIDE 8]; such coins marked the increasing advancement of French expansionist politics. Moreover, in 1805 or 1806, Eve's reference to the king's head as "Gottes leuchtend Antlitz" could have easily been understood as an ironic commentary on Napoleon's self-stylization as God's representative on earth.¹⁵

In re-establishing the collective political cause that was obfuscated by the jug's shattering, the coin functions differently than the jug regarding the stage-audience relation. Whereas Marthe's speech brings the jug into presence by way of imaginative evocation for both characters and the implicit spectators, the coin marks the distinction between stage and auditorium. While the characters perceive the coin as a visible object, the coin remains invisible to the spectators due to its small size. That is, whereas the coin is present for the characters *in actuality* in that it materially manifests the shared collective cause, it can only be evoked imaginatively for Kleist's audience. It is this imaginative space, I argue, that allows for the translation of the historical reference to the Dutch independence struggle into the current political situation of Napoleon's expansionist politics and the endangered status of Prussia. Accordingly, the employment of politically charged objects in *The Broken Jug* can be read as a

Bettelsack. Daher schreibt sich der Name der Geusen, den nachher in den Niederlanden alle diejenigen trugen, welche vom Pabstthum abfielen, und die Waffen gegen den König ergriffen." SSW, 175.

¹⁵ Most prominently, this came to the fore in *Le Catechisme Imperial* that Napoleon formulated in 1806. But even before, the image of Napoleon as a God-like Emperor was a commonplace in the public imagination.

theatrical technique to voice political resistance by enacting it and thereby potentially mobilize political action in a contemporary audience via imaginative re-investment or re-appropriation.

In terms of the two concepts of historicity I introduced in the beginning it can thus be said that, whereas for Schiller the cyclical model still seems to work (we remember his reference to the recurring course of time), Kleist appears to introduce a different understanding of history with *The Broken Jug*. Instead of merely referring to a historical past as an example to be copied, particularly the theatrical logics of the coin-scene suggest a reinvestment of the historical referent with contemporary meaning by way of the imagination. This process of imaginative re-appropriation is at work regarding the jug's and the coin's shift of symbolic meaning—from celebratory to the sign of a shared enemy—as well as regarding the historical analogy between the past event and the current political situation.

In conclusion, I propose that for Kleist, literature and particularly the dramatic arts provide a medium for historicity in times of political change, in terms of both conserving the historical legacy of a past as well as establishing an imaginative vision for the future. Furthermore, I take Kleist to advocate and in fact enact a concept of historicity in his dramatic work that seems to deviate from the cyclical model in that even though historical legacy remains a crucial point of reference, it however needs to be appropriated and adjusted to a changing political context.

Arguments

revolution and Kleist > using historical reference to what can be called the dutch revolution (struggle of independence from a foreign hegemony) in order to mobilize political activism >

Dutch wars of independence as model for eighteenth century revolutions

topos was used by schiller and goethe

what kind of historicity is it that Kleist employs? in how far is it different than the cyclical model?

the difference or deviation from a pure cyclical model can be described by looking at the ways in which the two signifiers of historical analogy, the jug and the coin are employed

> shifting meaning > from positive to negative > from celebratory symbol to a symbol of a shared enemy

> using historical reference but not as a model to be repeated but adjusting it and appropriating it according to a current political context

> theatrical medium particularly powerful because it enacts the collective experience of recognizing a joint cause

> distinction between the jug and the coin scene which represents an overcome symbol. the jug, moreover, is personal in character > unlike the coin it is not a circulatory item itself - even though it changed hands over time (though the reference to the Dutch independence has been used before (Schiller/Goethe) it is not effective in terms of recognition anymore - no one but Marthe seems to care) - in terms of medial / theatrical representation it is presented entirely imaginatively / in the coin scene, on the other hand, the act of recognition is enacted on stage >

the spectators are witnessing the act of recognition of a shared enemy - what they don't see, however, is the *pictorial representation* (just as much as in the jug scene it remains imaginative) yet, i suggest, the coin allows for a historical analogy between the Dutch wars of independence and the Befreiungskriege (wars of liberation) going on at Kleist's times > Napoleon depicted on them > **moreover, the coin is a circulatory object and therefore not of personal interest but a public good - it is not invested as an individual object - but requires a collective definition of value, value is determined collectively.**

pure narrative with one source (voice) – and the collective experience of enacting and witnessing the shared recognition of a joint cause on the theater stage – unification