

ASECS 2011: Freedom in Lessing's Time

The topic of my talk today is

Lessing's Notion of Imaginative Freedom [break] and the Dramatic Arts

Why that, and how will I proceed? – The notion 'free play of imagination' – "freies Spiel der Einbildungskraft" – of course comes up in Lessing's essay *Laokoon* (1766), in the context of the medial distinction between poetry and painting that Lessing develops in semiotic terms. This distinction depends on the ability of the respective form of art to evoke the free play of imagination. But why the theater? Well, in a letter to Friedrich Nicolai (you find an excerpt of that on your handout in quote no. 1) in this letter from 1769, Lessing reacts to criticism of his *Laokoon*, and explicitly claims that the dramatic arts are the only true *poetic* form of art. What I will thus venture today is the attempt to ask how the semiotic terms that according to Lessing determine the imaginative effect of both the visual arts (that would be painting) and the linguistic arts (that would be poetry), how these semiotic terms can be understood with regard to the *dramatic arts*. I will try to evaluate how Lessing might have conceptualized the **imaginative effect** of theater and how that might look like dramaturgically, in an actual play.

I will begin with a brief recap of Lessing's notion of *free play of imagination* as a leading criterion for the artistic achievement of painting and poetry in terms of their medial and semiotic conditions.

Then I will try to evaluate what happens to these conditions in the **dramatic** arts, which, as is we know, for Lessing are situated *between* painting and poetry. What happens to the

criteria that come up in the medial distinction, such as mental visualization in poetry on the one hand and visibility / or physical presence in painting on the other hand.

Finally I will present some observations about *Die Juden* an early play by Lessing from 1749, which I take to be a particularly interesting case with regard to the criteria I have just mentioned – imaginative processes on the one hand and visibility on the other hand.

I emphasize the "attempt" here, because this is not at all a finished argument and also the observations are rather parts of a thought in progress, so I hope you will forgive me the loose ends that will remain.

Let me start with a brief recap of *imaginative freedom* in the Laokoon since it will be fundamental for my line of thought.

When Lessing says there "Dasjenige aber nur allein ist fruchtbar, was der Einbildungskraft freies Spiel läßt" he is talking about painters who have to choose the right moment for their paintings in order to achieve the best possible aesthetic effect – the free play of imagination. To achieve this effect, painters have to try to overcome the "stasis" of their material, which Lessing (thereby drawing on a long tradition) defines as "natural" signs. These natural signs are spatially organized and visible, and they therefore are static – they *remain* in space. The right moment, "fruchtbar" how Lessing calls it, distinguishes itself from others due to its "transitoriness". It shows what has just happened as much as what will happen in the immediate future. This transitory moment adds a temporal dimension to the pictorial object, by means of engaging the *imagination* of its spectator.

The literary arts on the other hand use words or text, which can only be understood according to conventions and not due to similarities with "real things", their meaning can

change over time. Lessing calls them "arbitrary signs". In contrast to painting, the linguistic arts fundamentally depend on imaginative processes. However, they as well face a problem with regard to the "*free play* of imagination". The arbitrary signs of the linguistic arts are structured successively in time, which makes them transitory and presents a risk. Poets are threatened by an imaginative process that is not *unified* enough and thus does not lead to a *whole* imaginative impression. One could say an excess of arbitrariness threatens to impede the free play of imagination. Lessing contrasts for example Homer's description of Achilles' shield against Haller's *die Alpen*. Whereas Lessing sees Haller's description falling astray due to an endless succession of attributes, he takes Homer's *narrative account of how the shield was manufactured* as a perfect example for a whole mental image.

To sum that up it can be said that with regard to painting, the imaginative activity has to be enhanced, that means the *natural signs* have to be invested with significance within a narrative context. And for poetry, the imaginative activity needs structuring, or form, in order for it not to fall apart. That means, according to Lessing, in order to engage the audiences' imagination in the most effective way, to make it as it were play *freely*, each of the two forms of art has to transgress its own medial limits, and to strive for what the other form of art achieves. Whereas painting strives to compliment its mere visibility with a temporal narrative context, [break] poetry has to bind its succession of single images into an imaginative unity. Poetry is supposed to create *visibility* on a mental level.

[pause]

➤ **Against that backdrop: How can one understand Lessing's claim that the**

**dramatic arts are die "höchste Gattung der Poesie"? What might the
"transgression" of the semiotic and the medial boundaries of painting and
poetry tell about the theater?**

[pause] **21**

In order to approach this question, I want to turn to the second quote, a late epigram by
Lessing from 1779

[3 seconds] **21, 22, 23**

I take Kunst here to mean *artificial* and thus understand it for the sake of my argument as
analogous to *arbitrary*, whereas Natur I take analogous to *natural signs*. The relation that
Lessing describes here between Kunst und Natur, art and nature, in the dramatic arts
seems to be simple on the first glance, and pretty intuitive at once. In theater **artificial
conventional signs that are temporal** and mostly of **linguistic** nature (the words the
characters speak and that constitute the action) are juxtaposed with **spatially organized
visible signs** (that is all that, what we *see* on a stage during a theatrical production: the set
design, the figures, props and costumes). But as the epigram goes on it becomes clear that
Lessing does **not only refer to a mere juxtaposition** of Kunst und Natur, but rather to a
transitional relatedness between these signs. Art can become nature given that nature
deals with art or *acts* artfully – as the last stanza reads. It sounds like only when the two
levels converge, does true art become possible.

[pause]

On an intuitive level, to me, this evokes first the transfer of **textual entities onto
the stage**, such as **characters turning into stage figures**, and become **visible** and
audible, or **actions that are being performed**, and then second of the **transfer of
artifacts or external features into signifiers within the plot, costumes, masks or**

make-up create characters and **props** might be invested with symbolic significance.

Lessing is obviously – and against the background of the *Laokoon* discussion not surprisingly – interested in the **medial complexity of the dramatic arts** as one that oscillates between the *natural* (coexistent, spatial, visible, imitative) signs and the *arbitrary* (successive, temporal, audible, conventional).

Now let us briefly conclude: What exactly is it that according to Lessing the dramatic arts provide and that might be missing in the linguistic arts if we think of the general goal of art being to achieve the 'free play of imagination'? I think it is safe to say that for Lessing the **freedom of the imaginative process** is **dependent** on a **formal or material framing**. Just like a game requires a set of rules in order to be played, art needs to provide a formal structure to secure and enhance the imaginative process. The **play of imagination** obviously needs, as it were, **points of reference**, which serve as **evidence**, and prevent the flow of imagination from slipping off into insignificant arbitrariness. But, of course, this very medial precondition of the theater can easily also become a danger. We must not forget that in the *Laokoon* essay, Lessing claims that the boundaries of the pictorial arts also apply to theater. Translated into theatrical terms, I suggest that the spatial restrictions to *one moment* in a painting can be compared to the visible representation on stage. Just as the one expression of a painting might "freeze" as either a mere bodily expression that only affects the viewer sensually or as an allegory¹ with a fixed meaning, the dramatic arts are also in danger of being either "without any real significance" or remaining too much within the scope of generic conventions.

¹ (according to Lessing's understanding of an allegory as a fixed meaning of something)

[pause] 21

With these points in mind, I want to present a couple of observations that I made in Lessing's *Die Juden* with regard to the interrelation of *arbitrary* and *natural* signs and what that could mean for a "free play" of imagination on stage. In this play Lessing clearly dramatizes the theatrical interrelation of the visible and the invisible or the static and the transitory. It is staged how material artifacts are used as dramatic tools that play a role in setting free imaginative conceptions. One finds a pretty interesting economy of information distribution, of character presentation, and particular objects that change hands, in terms of what Lessing obviously wanted his spectators to "see".

[pause]

I am of course well aware of the time leap that I am venturing here from the *Laokoon* back to this play written 17 years earlier. By doing that I do not at all want to suggest that Lessing "anticipated" his later theory in his early plays. Rather, I take Lessing's earlier plays to be dramaturgical experiments in which he tried out different theatrical means, which open up questions and perspectives that he will draw on and develop in his later dramatic and theoretical writings.

[pause]

Die Juden revolves around the anti-Semitic prejudices against which the "traveler" – as the Jewish character is called throughout the play – is established as a paradigmatic example for a truly virtuous philanthropist. Thus the play is intended to undermine the fixed imaginative preset of its audience. That starts already with the title *Die Juden*.^{2,3}

² Q&A: *Die Juden* – refers to the anti-Semitic prejudice itself: Die Juden, das gottlose Volk etc, as a generalization of a nation's characteristics etc.

For the viewer the imaginative process is already set in motion when he/she reads the title. According to the rules of comedy it raises the expectation that the title-feature is going to be ridiculed, and thus the play would confirm anti-Semitic prejudices. The cast listing, however, does not indicate a Jew, and the Jewish identity of the traveler is only disclosed in the end. It is not revealed *whether* there will be a Jewish character at all and if so *who* it will be. In the second act, the anti-Semitic stereotype unfolds against the backdrop of an attempted robbery of the baron by the baron's bailiff Martin Krumm, which had been prevented by the Jewish traveler. As it turns out in the course of the two first scenes, the thieves had disguised themselves as Jews by means of stereotypical accessories such as beards and hats. Curiously, the stereotypical accusation of Jews being "Betrieger, Diebe und Straßenräuber" is presented by the bailiff as means of disguise of his own viciousness, which is made very clear from the beginning on. The "traveler" thus is introduced as the miraculously virtuous character whose identity is unknown. He is introduced **against the anti-Semitic prejudice** of the general public and the theater audiences. Despite the many critical reactions against *Die Juden*, where it was faulted that such an extremely virtuous character as the traveler was an "unlikely" appearance, I take it to be an attempt to challenge and **to provoke the rusty imagination** of his audience, in the sense of: 'Look what you are doing, this is ridiculous! You are just applying the stereotype to every situation without even questioning it – although the case might actually be different.' When in the end it turns out that the traveler's previously alleged identity as a murderer would have made him more eligible to marry the young

³ Possible Q&A reference is the Breslauer Unfall, the accident in the gunpowder tower in 1749, Frederick the great in Breslau since I think the early 1740, anti-Semitic politics there...

baroness than his revealed identity as a most virtuous, rich and well educated Jew, this is an apparent paradox. This provocation of the spectator's prejudices is **staged** on the level of the plot and can be seen as mirrored in the reaction of the baron. He is clearly able to acknowledge the graciousness of the traveler, while still repeating the anti-Semitic stereotype. When faced with the true identity of the traveler, he is literally forced to revise his opinion, or his *image* of the Jews, although the play does not go as far as offering a complete reversal and letting the traveler marry the young baroness.⁴

[pause]

So far, I have shown the imaginative aspect of the play – Which is evoked by the arbitrary linguistic sign of the title *Die Juden*, and the successive development of the plot. This now is closely connected with the dramatization of the **visible**. The undermining of the anti-Semitic prejudice does not only happen in the *minds* of the audiences, but is also "acted out" in front of their eyes. They "see" what goes wrong, they "see" the well-meaning traveler, and the insidious behavior of the baron's bailiff, they "see" that the anti-Semitic stereotype corresponds more with the bailiff than with anybody else and on no account with the traveler, and thus loses its significance.

[pause]

But this **visible** aspect plays out yet **elsewhere**. The play does employ props in a conspicuous manner, and that shall be the last point of my talk today.

To begin with, there is the silver snuffbox that is traded throughout the play and serves as

⁴ Lessing might not have seen his audience to be ready yet, or he might not have considered comedy to be the right genre. In *Nathan* Lessing will eventually push that line of argument a little further, but that is a different story.

a material manifestation of the bailiff's **perfidy**. In the second act the thief Martin Krumm steals the snuffbox from the traveler as revenge for the failed robbery. Then it is passed on from Krumm to the maid Lisette and eventually to Christian, the traveler's servant. When Christian finally shows it to the traveler, it has made its round and one could almost say it created a side-plot on its own. It pops up as a reminder of the injustice that is happening to the traveler. Although, as he says himself in scene fifteen, missing this snuffbox is a 'trifle' "eine Kleinigkeit", it still matters "gleichwohl ist mir der Verlust empfindlich". In the play, the snuffbox seems to stand for more than just itself. With that said, it does not surprise that the snuffbox leads to the appearance of a second prop that is of significance. The traveler confronts Martin Krumm in scene sixteen with the question for the snuffbox, and when the thief empties his pockets to show that he does not possess the snuffbox (*anymore* as we, the audience, know) – suddenly the fake beards that the thieves had used as disguise in the attempted robbery fall out:

(this is the third quote on the handout)

[pause 2 seconds] **21, 22**

Not only is this a funny scene, but with the beards the whole imaginative argument materializes, if you will. The beards signify the disguise, and thus both the robbery AND the anti-Semitic prejudice at the same time. One could read the two props that Lessing employs in *Die Juden* and emphasizes in the stage directions⁵ one could read the props as material "evidence" in the trial against anti-Semitic prejudices, although each of them functions somewhat differently within the plot. Whereas the beard eventually serves as

⁵ – in the quote you see the extensive use of stage directions, usually Lessing employs them only scarcely

real evidence, and makes the bailiff confess, the snuffbox does not really lead to anything, except maybe to a repeated suspicion.⁶

[pause] 21

As a tentative conclusion I would say, that in *Die Juden*, we have the imaginative progression from the deeply rooted anti-Semitic conviction toward the disclosed prejudice. This progress is made visible in its dramatization: it is acted out in front of the spectator's eyes. In that sense, the entire play can be read as the *staging* of a fixed imagination being freed. And in order for that to become possible, words are obviously not enough. The purely **mental**, **imaginative** representation (that linguistic poetry can achieve) has in fact to be made **visible**. On the other hand the **visible things** have to be revealed as just as **conventional** – such as the beard or the snuffbox signify the arbitrariness of the anti-Semitic prejudice.

In *Die Juden*, one could say, the visible actions and side-plots **guide** the audience's imaginative progress that is evoked and provoked by the main plot. The goal of that play seems to be to set the imagination of its audiences free by means of a conscious employment of the semiotic and medial conditions of the theater.

⁶ In that regard Willi Götschel provides a suitable idea in a recent article. He points out that the box, as the *corpus delicti*, "**rehearses** the economy of the prejudice", since in the end, the traveler gives the box that had been passed on as a stolen good, to his servant, but now as a *gift*.⁶ Götschel reads the box as a signifier following the progression of the anti-Semitic prejudice. As long as the prejudice is persisting, the box is passed on illegitimately. Yet, as soon as the prejudice is disclosed as such and thus invalidated (at least for the moment), the box can be passed on and acknowledged as a true gift.