The Technological Eye: Theater Lighting and *Guckkasten* in Michaelis and Goethe

In Goethe’s Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilern [Festival in Plundersweilern] and Johann Benjamin Michaelis’s Amors Guckkasten, the Guckkasten [peepshow, magic lantern, shadow show, curiosity box] makes an enigmatic appearance as theater prop and plot device. Technology is function: if these plays have a plot, it is theater lighting. Furthermore, technology and optical devices serve as props for the imagination. Goethe rehabilitates Hannswurst as Lichtputzer [candle-trimmer]. As theoretical props, both Fredric Jameson and Bakhtin make surprise appearances. Indeed, in the entire history of entertainment and news media, traditions of carnival and technological development are more interrelated than meets the eye. Goethe and Michaelis transform the marketplace into a theatrical feast celebrating mixed media, in which print and visual cultures, literary and visual genres, Hannswurst technology – Guckkasten, shadow play, magic lantern, and lighting – are not contradictions.¹

In theater, it is all a matter of lighting, without which we would all be left in the dark.² The would-be Hannswurst in Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilern is a theatrical anti-sandman, whose function is to keep the audience from falling asleep from boredom, but he also has a real job to do, as Lichtputzer. In the history of theater, the candle-trimmer is among the most significant of forgotten and neglected figures. Lighting is the central technical problem of the European stage; solutions to problems of lighting affect every aspect of dramaturgical

¹ Editors’ note: Throughout this essay Hannswurst refers to the generic character, while Hannswurst refers to Goethe’s incarnation of the character.

² A much longer and comprehensive version of this essay appears as chapter four in my forthcoming book: *The Pathos of Character: Goethe, Performance, 1775*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 2006. A longer, related essay, focusing on all the entertainers in Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilern and their diverse origins, appears in the *Goethe Yearbook* 13 (2005). The original research for this chapter was conducted for my 1994 Yale dissertation, *The Microcosm of Comedy: Goethe and Eighteenth-Century Theater*. The raw materials were radically refreshed and rethought – thanks to the Goethe-Gesellschaft and the Stiftung Weimarer Kultur – during the summer of 1996 in Weimar while living among the ghosts in the Nietzschehaus. I presented a paper with an abbreviated, family resemblance to this essay at the ASECS 2000 in Philadelphia for the Goethe Society panel “Goethe and Visual Culture”. My appreciation goes to Cyrus Hamlin, Cecile Cazort Zorach, and Curt Bentzel for wading with me through the deluge; to Waltraud Maierhofer, Theodore Fiedler, David Wellbery, and especially Catriona MacLeod, Eve Moore, and Patricia Simpson for their astute and kind suggestions as I treaded water.
script and performance. Goethe’s eighteenth-century stage was lit “durch Wachskerzen, Talglichter und Ölfächer” [“with wax candles, torches, and oil lamps”], which illuminated the stage and theater equally, and in most cases, equally badly. The candle-lit chandelier in the middle of the auditorium was the major source of light for both actors and audience, which left the audience both exposed and often of as much interest as the production itself. Lighting, therefore, dictates the parabasic, carnivalesque, and feedback-loop atmosphere of most theaters in eighteenth-century Germany, where the audience by necessity becomes part of the spectacle.

Parabasis refers to direct addresses to the audience, verbally and physically stepping across the footlights:

This is an interlude, named from parabainein, to step across, to come forward, to turn around to the spectators instead of to the actors, and address the audience. This has rightly been recognized as the earliest element of comedy, developed from the original komos.

In Romanticism, such illusion-breaking dialog becomes the very principle of self-reflection itself, Friedrich Schlegel’s dictum, “Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parakbase” [“Ironic is a permanent parabasis”]. In general, parabasis is a dynamic principle of constant interruption. “Carnivalesque” refers to the traces of cultural phenomena already dead, yet celebrated in comic effigy in ritual, religious, or festive settings, a world turned upside down, in which social norms

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3 Ruth Padel: Making Space Speak. In: Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context. Ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990. “On our stage, light orchestrates the spectators’ feeling by contrasting tones. Western understanding of theatrical space was changed forever by Adolph Appia and the subsequent development of his ideas about the use of light. Light is now theater’s most important plastic medium, ‘scene-painter, interpreter’, with ‘the character of a form in space’”. P. 339. Padel makes this point in comparison to Greek theater, which provided little or no experience of lighting effects; the very concept of stage lighting would be foreign to the “daylight” of the Greek theater experience.

4 Sybille Maurer-Schmoock: Deutsches Theater im 18. Jahrhundert. Tübingen: Niemeyer 1981. Pp. 68–69. (Studien zur deutschen Literatur 71): “The most important source of light for the auditorium was a chandelier, studded with candles, hanging in the middle of the room. The audience space was therefore lit during the entire performance, a situation, which often focused attention more on the public than on the stage: being seen was more important than seeing”. All German secondary literature is cited in English in my own translation. I take full responsibility for all mistakes, indelicacies, and liberties in translation, a delicate and painstaking task, but one intended to bring important work from Germany to the attention of an American and English audience.
