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PASSING THROUGH INFINITY

Kleist’s Marionettentheater, Kantian Metaphor, and the Spherical Geometry of Grace

A metaphor is not an equation. A mathematical equation is not a trope. Philosophers and rhetoricians, however, have historically had much to say about the precise nature of the non-identity between these two modes of establishing an identity, and on December 10, 1810, Heinrich von Kleist joined the fray. The following aphorism appeared in his short-lived daily newspaper, Die Berliner Abendblätter, just two days before the first installment of his best-known text, the enigmatic quasi-dialogue, Über das Marionettentheater:

Man könnte die Menschen in zwei Klassen abteilen; in solche, die sich auf eine Metapher und 2) in solche, die sich auf eine Formel verstehn. Deren, die sich auf beides verstehn, sind zu wenige, sie machen keine Klasse aus.¹

The implicit gesture of a category-transcending mastery, which the author-figure of this aphorism shares with all who dare to directly compare the two domains of metaphor and mathematics, does not extend to an attempt to account, conceptually, for the actual content of the metaphor-formula relation. Indeed, the proposed triadic division of humankind faithfully replicates, on the second-order level of knowing subjects, the unbridgeable gap that has traditionally been thought to divide the qualitative and quantitative genres of knowable objects.

¹ Heinrich von Kleist, “Fragmente,” Berliner Abendblätter I, Sämtliche Werke, ed. Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle, Berlin: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1988, Vol. II:7, p. 310. The aphorism was published as part of a pair. Its counterpart treats the enormous mental energy required to defend certain errors, and provides as an example the complex system of planetary orbits developed by the astronomer Tycho Brahe, in the course of his efforts to maintain the outdated model of an earth-centered universe. Given that Immanuel Kant’s equally complex theory of metaphor, developed in the wake of his so-called “Copernican Revolution,” will turn out to owe its existence, from Kleist’s perspective, to...
from one another. To fail to constitute a class, according to the principles of a traditional
taxonomy, means to lack a definitional criterion, in the form of a specific differentiating property
(Aristotle’s *differentia specifica*), which all and only all members could be presumed to share.
Since the elite few who understand both metaphorical and mathematical logic do not do so,
apparently, on the basis of any specifiable feature common to the two domains of knowledge,
their insight carves out for them no communal space. They belong to both groups without
surpassing either in the direction of a more general third.

Must we therefore conclude, however, that these few simply *know* schizophrenically, without
being able to translate between metaphoric and mathematical modes of comprehension even for
and within themselves? Or is there some other, conceptually non-classifiable yet nonetheless
meaningful sense in which these two “halves” of the human could be said to communicate? And
if we presume the latter, what would be the consequences of such communication, for the
bifurcation here established as well as for more conventional partitions like those of mind and
body, organism and machine, freedom and necessity, art and nature, genius and technique? It
will be my contention, in the paper below, that Kleist’s *Über das Marionettentheater*—which
explicitly explores the classical conundrum of the mind-body, organism-machine, freedom-
necessity, genius-technique relation, with the help of a defiantly *unclassical* cast of puppets, one-
legged dancers, and fencing bears—provides a historically new and hence also philosophically
significant approach to this set of questions. More specifically: I will be arguing that Immanuel
Kant’s powerful reflections, in paragraph 59 of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, on the “symbolic”
character of beauty, becomes, for Kleist, via the mediation of Friedrich Schiller’s theory of
human grace, the occasion for a never-before explicated reflection on the relationship between

an equally outdated mathematical and aesthetic model of harmony, it might be possible to read this aphorism as a
veiled barb directed at Kant himself.
mathematics and metaphor. The text thus unfolds, according to my interpretation, as a playful inquiry into the implications, for late 18th century aesthetic theory, of late 18th century

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2 My interpretation thus seeks to integrate three different scholarly approaches to the text that have historically remained quite separate, namely: the approach by way of Kant, the approach by way of metaphor theory, and the approach by way of mathematics. The latter strain, which on my reading offers the key point of connection between the other two, is by far the least developed in the literature. On Kleist and Kant, see, classically, Ernst Cassirer, “Heinrich von Kleist und die Kantische Philosophie”, in: ders. Idee und Gestalt, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1921, pp. 157-202 (originally 1919); Ludwig Muth, Kleist und Kant: Versuch einer neuen Interpretation, Cologne: Kölner Universitätsverlag, 1954; and Werner Hamacher, “Das Beben der Darstellung”, in: David E. Wellbery (ed.), Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft: Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists “Das Erdbeben in Chili”, Munich: Beck, 1985, pp. 149-173. More recently, see Bernhard Greiner, Kleists Dramen und Erzählungen, Tübingen: A. Francke, 2000; James Phillips, The Equivocation of Reason: Kleist Reading Kant, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007; and Timothy J. Mehigan, Heinrich von Kleist: Writing After Kant, Rochester: Camden House, 2011. In the wake of Hamacher’s brilliant essay on Kleist’s Kantian principle of “negative Darstellung,” recent work in this vein has tended to revolve primarily around Kleist’s relationship to the Kantian sublime. I will be focusing here, instead, on Kleist’s relationship to the Kantian structure of beauty, though I hope also to have made at least implicitly clear, by the end, that the two modes of inquiry are deeply related. For a reading of Kant and Kleist that draws explicitly on Kant’s theory of beauty-as-symbol for a reading of the Marionettentheater, see Greiner (cited above), pp. 197-219; Greiner’s lack of interest in the mathematical character of the dancer’s final similes, combined with his commitment to a Lacanian understanding of difference, leads him to an interpretation very different from my own. On Kleist and metaphor, see, in addition to the Hamacher essay cited above, the many other nuanced readings in the deconstructive tradition, particularly Carol Jacobs, “The Style of Kleist”, in: Diacritics 9/1979, pp. 47-61; William Ray, “Suspended in the Mirror: Language and Self in Kleist’s ‘Über das Marionettentheater’”, in: Studies in Romanticism 18/1979, pp. 521-545; Paul de Man, “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s Über das Marionettentheater”, in: The Rhetoric of Romanticism. New York City: Columbia University Press, 1984, pp. 263-290; and Cynthia Chase, “Models of Narrative: Mechanical Doll, Exploding Machine”, in: Oxford Literary Review 6/1984, pp. 57-69. While this style of interpretation still offers some of the most powerful insights available into the tropic structure of Kleist’s text(s), the deconstructive analyses all suffer, in my opinion, from their shared refusal to take seriously, and thus to actually read, the mathematical images that punctuate the Marionettentheater. (De Man’s far too simplistic equation of “the mathematical,” in general, with a rather vague notion of aesthetic formalization, is here paradigmatic). The deconstructive tradition, however, is by no means unusual in this regard. Indeed, to my knowledge, only two scholars have made a genuine attempt to explicate Kleist’s mathematical images in terms of their actual, mathematical significance. On Kleist and mathematics, see Sydna Stern Weiss, “Kleist and Mathematics: The Non-Euclidean Idea in the Conclusion of the ‘Marionettentheater’”, in: Alex Ugrinsky (ed.), Heinrich von Kleist Studien, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1981, pp. 117-126; and Wolf Kittler, “Falling after the Fall: The Analysis of the Infinite in Kleist’s Marionettentheater”, in: Bernd Fischer and Timothy Mehigan (ed.), Heinrich von Kleist and Modernity, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011, pp. 279-93. Kittler focuses primarily on the points of similarity between Kleist’s dancer’s account of the marionette dancer’s “mathematical” theory of grace and Kant’s theory of beauty
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mathematical ideas: Kleist’s *Marionettentheater*, I will seek to show, performs an account of the way in which modern developments in the thinking of quantitative analogies can transform, if taken seriously, our understanding of what is possible, and hence also desirable, for the qualitative analogies of art.

I.

Kleist’s text takes the form of a narrated dialogue between the anonymous narrator and the “dancer C,” after a chance encounter in a public garden reveals their fundamental disagreement about the nature of graceful movement. As many commentators have noted, the conversation has the agonistic quality of a verbal sparring match: the progression from the dancer’s disquisition about the workings of wooden marionettes, to the narrator’s anecdote about a beautiful young boy in a bath, back to the dancer’s anecdote about a fencing bear—each of which provides a distinct model of ostensibly graceful behavior—is punctuated by submerged gestures of rhetorical one-upmanship and provocation. The question of how to mediate, gracefully, between the two irreconcilable poles of human existence, between mind and matter, ideality and sensuality, is thus inextricably bound up, in Kleist’s treatment, with the question of how to mediate, effectively, between individual, embodied humans. The narrator disagrees with the

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4 This deep concern with the bodily conditions of aesthetic communication is characteristic of Kleist’s oeuvre more generally, and particularly of the series of short texts published between 1810 and 1811 in the *Berliner Abendblätter*: both the “Brief eines Mahlers an seinen Sohn” and the “Letter from One Poet to Another,” for instance, which appeared in October, 1810 and January, 1811, respectively, revolve in large part around the physical mechanics of artistic self-expression, and the dyadic constellations of desire out of which it unfolds. Heinrich von Kleist, “Brief eines Mahlers an seinen Sohn”, in: ders., *Sämtliche Werke* vol. II/7 (see note 1), pp. 101-2; and “Brief
dancer about the nature of the relationship that binds these two different forms of mediation together. He argues, along traditional lines, that the former is merely a particularly pure form of the latter (one can express one’s spiritual interiority to others either gracefully or ungracefully, directly or indirectly, sincerely or insincerely), and that the medium of aesthetic spectacle must therefore remain fundamentally continuous with the medium of intersubjective communication. (“Ich sagte, daß [...] er mich doch nimmermehr glauben machen würde, daß in einem mechanischen Gliedermann mehr Anmuth enthalten sein könne, als in dem Bau des menschlichen Körpers.”5) The dancer, on the other hand, champions the aesthetic potential of forcibly uncoupling the two realms, and insists that true grace must be sought beyond the realm of purely human self-expression. (“Er versetzte, daß es dem Menschen schlechthin unmöglich wäre, den Gliedermann darin auch nur zu erreichen. Nur ein Gott könne sich, auf diesem Felde, mit der Materie messen, und hier sei der Punct, wo die beiden Enden der ringförmigen Welt in einander griffen” [325].)

The discussion concludes with a pair of famously difficult similes, provided by the dancer as an illustration of his famously peculiar thesis. The first concerns two lines that mysteriously manage to intersect twice, on two different “sides” of infinity; the second describes the behavior of an image as reflected in a concave mirror. I will cite the final passage here in full, since my reading of these similes, and their significance within the context of the dancer and the narrator’s conversation, constitutes the crux of my argument about the relationship between grace and mathematics:

Nun, mein vortrefflicher Freund, sagte Herr C…, so sind Sie im Besitz von allem, was nötig ist, um mich zu begreifen. Wir sehen, daß in dem Maße, als, in der organischen Welt, die Reflexion dunkler und schwächer wird, die Grazie darin immer strahlender und herrschender

hervortritt. – Doch so, wie sich der Durchschnitt zweier Linien, auf der einen Seite eines Punkts, nach dem Durchgang durch das Unendliche, plötzlich wieder auf der andern Seite einfindet, oder das Bild des Hohlspiegels, nachdem es sich in das Unendliche entfernt hat, plötzlich wieder dicht vor uns tritt: so findet sich auch, wenn die Erkenntnis gleichsam durch ein Unendliches gegangen ist, die Grazie wieder ein; so, daß sie, zu gleicher Zeit, in dem jenigen menschlichen Körperbau am reinsten erscheint, der entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewußtsein hat, d.h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott.

Mithin, sagte ich ein wenig zerstreut, müssten wir wieder von dem Baum der Erkenntnis essen, um in den Stand der Unschuld zurückzufallen?

Allerdings, antwortete er; das ist das letzte Kapitel von der Geschichte der Welt. (330-1)

Despite the profoundly non-intuitive nature of these figures, the question of their significance—and even the much simpler question of what it is they actually describe—has received relatively little serious attention within the vast secondary literature on the Marionettentheater. Part of the reason for this scholarly reticence clearly lies in the text itself, offering as it does a kind of default interpretation that, if taken seriously, would seem to obviate the need for too much further explanation. Similes, after all, always include their own translations as a matter of rhetorical structure, and this one is no exception.

According to the dancer C., then, the important thing about these journeys to infinity and back is their capacity to illustrate the (pseudo)teleological arc of his (quasi)Idealist Geschichtsphilosophie. In the beginning, and “beginning” here refers to Eden, humanity dwelt in a state of continual grace, where spirit never did battle with matter, and free will had not yet destabilized the harmony of paradisiacal embodiment. The Fall, for Idealist philosophers like Kant and Schiller—and disciples like the dancer—represents above all the rupture of choice: mankind chooses to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and in doing so chooses the possibility of ethical decision. The result is a freedom that necessarily transcends the harmonious containment of Eden, where only the Good is conceivable and bodies only ever express the will of their Creator. The capacity for ethical error thus also entails the capacity for aesthetic misstep: Grace, defined classically by Schiller, in the essay Über Anmut und Würde, as the visible
consequence of the mind-matter accord ("in einer schönen Seele ist es also, wo Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft, Pflicht und Neigung harmonieren, und Grazie ist ihr Ausdruck in der Erscheinung"), was once the inalienable condition of all being. In the post-Fall world, it reemerges as an ideal to be striven toward, in conjunction with a more general, teleological process of moral self-formation (Bildung). The goal, for both Schiller and Kleist’s dancer, is to get “back” to the grace-infused structure of the origin, without actually regressing into a prelapsarian state of “mindless” obedience. To move forward, with the help of the will, toward a redeemed paradisiacal condition that would fulfill humankind’s potential for doing Good, and moving gracefully, on purpose.

The dancer represents this redeemed condition as one of infinite consciousness, and pronounces it the final chapter in the history of the world. He then uses this idea to argue for the inferiority of human grace in the here and now. His departure from a conventional, Schillerian perspective like the narrator’s, which would ascribe the capacity for grace exclusively to human beings, must therefore be considered a matter of degree rather than kind. In effect, he believes so wholeheartedly in the notion of a post-Fall disharmony that Schiller’s necessarily exceptional examples of a human grace cannot interest him. Instead, he turns to the latent potential of what he calls “dead matter,” where the spirit of a conscious will, insofar as it is absent, cannot possibly be said to interfere with the gracefulfulness of physical movement. The claim is essentially that a truly graceful relationship between spirit and matter can exist only where one of the two elements is actually absent—and thus where no relationship exists at all. (“Allerdings,” the

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7 Grace itself, of course, cannot be consciously striven toward, since it exists for Schiller only as the involuntary component of voluntary movements. The disposition, however, that most naturally leads to such involuntary movements, namely the disposition that sincerely wills the morally good, can and must be sought, taught, and practiced. One does not strive, in other words, to move one’s body gracefully, but rather to become the sort of person for whom bodily desires accord with moral duty.
narrator thinks to himself sardonically, “kann der Geist nicht irren, da, wo keiner vorhanden ist” [323]).

While some of the most interesting readings of Über das Marionettentheater have in fact arisen from a willingness to take seriously the dancer’s own interpretation of his position—I am thinking here, in particular, of those readings that turn Kleist into a kind of modernist avant la lettre, championing the mechanistic over the organic and the materiality of the medium over the subjectivity of the artist—there are obviously many good reasons not to bestow on the dancer’s final summation the status of definitive “last word.” His theses may be more sophisticated and surprising than those of his rather staid and traditionally-minded interlocutor, the narrator. Nevertheless, the very dynamic of their conversation, which reads like an erotically-charged pas de deux, necessarily undermines any attempt to assign absolute privilege to either viewpoint. And even if this were not the case: the dancer’s account is too riddled with conceptual contradictions to provide a stable foundation for the notion of an alternative grace. What could it possibly mean, for instance, for God, in His capacity as absolute spirit, to possess a human body? And yet, if God is not embodied, how can we understand the dancer’s insistence that grace appears in its greatest purity “in demjenigen menschlichen Körperbau, der entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewußtsein hat, d.h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott?” It is incoherencies like this one, combined with the structural instability of the text as a whole, that have led so many readers to conclude that Über das Marionettentheater operates exclusively on the negative plane of parody, drawing attention to absurdities within the Idealist paradigm without offering any positive aesthetic vision of its own.9

8 For a particularly productive version of this approach, see Schneider, “Deconstruction of the Hermeneutical Body” (see note 3).
9 The earliest proponents of the ironic approach, which has remained the dominant tendency, are Wolfgang Binder, “Ironischer Idealismus: Kleists unwillige Zeitgenossenschaft”, in: ders., Aufschlüsse: Studien zur deutschen
I want to try out a different approach here, one that remains ultimately agnostic, or even skeptical, vis-a-vis the philosophical viability of the dancer’s explicitly held positions, while seeking nonetheless to make plausible the high degree of internal coherence—and historico-philosophical significance—that characterize his alternative models of grace. I will therefore be bracketing, for the most part, the dancer’s own, often patently absurd assertions regarding the “meaning” of his various anecdotes, examples, and images, in order to make room for the possibility of a more powerful, and more polemical, reconceptualization of Idealist aesthetic theory. The question of whether this reconceptualization “actually” conforms to Kleist’s own position, and thus of whether the text “truly” operates on a level other than parody, is one I will leave for the reader to decide. The question, on the other hand, of whether the text actively performs such a reconceptualization is one I hope to convincingly answer in the affirmative. The agon that drives the dialogue is thus, on my interpretation, two-pronged: the interaction between narrator and dancer, which itself belongs to the traditional category of human-to-human communication and expressive (un)grace, sets in scene an encounter between the traditional and an alternative aesthetic model, which thereupon proceeds to destabilize with ever-increasing intensity the apparent primacy of its own dialogic frame. The final narrated episode with the bear, I will suggest by way of conclusion, dramatizes this shift in priority by subordinating the traditional principles of human self-expression—the necessarily metaphorical operation of “externalizing” the spirit or heart—to the rigorously anti-expressivist rules of an entirely different kind of spectacle.

II.

I will begin by explaining what I take the dancer’s two, final similes, at the most basic, descriptive level, to signify (irrespective of whether the dancer himself can be presumed to actually understand this significance), before turning to the problem of their particular relevance within the context of the Marionette Theater’s quasi-Idealist aesthetic discourse. In the first simile, the dancer speaks of two lines that meet, pass through infinity and reunite on the “other side” of the original intersection point. Despite the striking similarity between this image and the dancer’s earlier reference to “der Punkt, wo die beiden Enden der ringförmigen Welt ineinander griffen” (M 325) the notion of the world as round, taken by itself, cannot help us much here, since no legitimate geometrical sense exists in which the equator of a standard sphere could reasonably be construed as infinite.\(^\text{10}\) There is, however, a different geometrical model that perfectly fits the scenario described in the simile, and that has never, to my knowledge, been brought into connection with Kleist’s text, namely: the model of stereographic projection, which allows for the projection of spherical surfaces onto a two-dimensional plane. Already in use among the Egyptians and ancient Greeks for the construction of star charts, stereographic projection returned to the scientific forefront from the 16\(^{th}\) century onward, as a technique for mapping the globe and exploring the laws of optics. By the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century, it belonged among the most widely discussed phenomena of applied topology—it was a topic of particular interest for Kant’s friend and admirer, Johann Heinrich Lambert, after whom an important

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\(^{10}\) This is part of the problem with Sydna Stern Weiss’ account (see note 2), and one of the reasons why she ultimately fails to substantiate, mathematically-speaking, her basically correct intuition about the anti-Euclidian thrust of the dancer’s images.
version of the projection is also named—and Kleist would thus almost certainly have encountered it during the time he spent studying mathematics in Freiburg and Paris.\textsuperscript{12}

The operational principle of stereographic projection is as follows: a sphere is imagined to rest upon a plane, and a light source is imagined to rest at the top-most point (or at any point along this vertical axis) of the sphere. All points on the surface of the sphere then appear in the plane as “shadows” cast onto the planar “ground” by the rays from the light source. Points higher up on the sphere appear in the plane as points further away from the origin or center. The sole point on the sphere, therefore, that cannot be thus “reflected” onto the plane is the one where the light source is situated, since this point casts its shadow only at infinity—and then also in every conceivable direction. It is this point, I am arguing, to which Kleist’s dancer refers when he speaks of lines that “pass through” infinity in order to reconnect again “on the other side.” The dynamic in question is illustrated by the diagram below (Figure 1), where it becomes obvious that a pair of intersecting lines in the plane will necessarily reappear as a pair of intersecting great circles once they have been “translated” into the topological “terms” of the sphere. These circles, which used to be lines, will now intersect with one another both “before” they pass through the north pole and “after,” thereby providing the basis for the dancer’s seemingly inexplicable image of a second, post-infinity “crossing.”

\textsuperscript{11} Lambert was also, and relatedly, the author of one of the most significant 18\textsuperscript{th} century attempts to prove the so-called “parallel postulate” of Euclid. Such attempts, which demonstrated that the parallel postulate was independent of Euclid’s other geometrical axioms, laid the foundations for the 19\textsuperscript{th} century acceptance of non-Euclidian geometries, which are geometries within which this postulate does not hold. See Johann Heinrich Lambert, “Theorie der Parallellinien”, in: \textit{Leipziger Magazin für reine und angewandte Mathematik} I/1786, pp. 137–64 and 325–58. On the significance of Lambert’s work for the 18\textsuperscript{th} century understanding of \textit{Darstellung} at the nexus of geometry and philosophy, see Rüdiger Campe, “Shapes and Figures—Geometry and Rhetoric in the Age of Evidence”, in: \textit{Monatshefte} 102/2010, pp. 285-99. For a reading of Lambert’s diagrammatic imagination in the tradition of Horst Bredekamp, see Tobias Vogelsang, \textit{Von Linien und Kurven: Johann Heinrich Lambert und der Graph der magnetischen Abweichung}, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2012. On the relationship between Lambert and Kant, see Michael Friedman, “Kant, Lambert, and Solidity”, in: ders., \textit{Kant’s Construction of Nature: A Reading of the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 121-30. \textsuperscript{12} Sydna Stern Weiss provides an overview of Kleist’s mathematical background in “Kleist and Mathematics” (see note 2), pp. 118-22.
Figure 1: Two intersecting lines in the plane and their circular, stereographic projections.\textsuperscript{13}

If I am correct about the nature of the geometrical relationship here in play, then the dancer’s second simile actually becomes readable as a kind of topological inversion of the first. The relevant physical facts are as follows: A concave mirror, which curves away from the observer, reflects objects that approach it in such a way that the image—as captured in mathematical ray diagrams like the ones below (Figure 2)—first recedes into the infinite distance before suddenly reappearing, magnified, on the other side of the mirror.

Figure 2: The image-forming behavior of a concave, spherical mirror.\(^{14}\)

Kleist’s dancer’s quite precise description of this phenomenon (“wie […] das Bild des Hohlspiegels, nachdem es sich in das Unendliche entfernt hat, plötzlich wieder dicht vor uns tritt” [330]) makes unambiguously clear that Kleist himself has in mind, here, the mathematical-optical model of concave reflection, rather than the empirical experience of gazing into a concave mirror. (The progression of images one actually sees as one approaches a concave mirror is in fact quite different: the inverted image simply gets bigger and bigger until it blurrily fills the mirror, without at all appearing to recede “into infinity.”) It is therefore necessary to elaborate, briefly, on the specifically geometrical character of the optical relationships involved. In diagrams a) through c) of Figure 2, above, a person stands behind the point known in optics as the **focus**. In order to calculate how far away and how large the reflected image of this person will appear, one must locate the point where the relevant reflected rays intersect. (The relevant rays in this case, are the reflection of the ray proceeding horizontally from the person’s head to the point on the mirror directly opposite, the reflection of the ray proceeding from the person’s head to the very center of the mirror, and the reflection of the ray proceeding from the person’s head through the central axis.) As the person moves closer and closer to the focus, the intersection point of the reflected rays will move ever further behind her back and will occur ever further beneath the center axis, with the result that the reflected image will appear, *in the ray diagram*, to be gradually moving off into the distance and growing in size. When the person actually reaches the focus, however, something strange occurs, since, while the rays proceeding from her head still hit the mirror at easily specifiable points, the rays reflected back from those points turn out to be parallel, which means that they will never actually meet. In the language of Newtonian optics it is said that the image is formed at infinity, and in the mirror itself, the image

appears as a comprehensive blur. Once the person has passed beyond the focus, as shown in diagram d), above, the trajectories of the reflected rays again intersect, albeit now on the other side of the mirror, generating an image that, after having disappeared entirely from the ray diagram—though not from the mirror—now suddenly reappears, magnified and right up close.

Whereas the first of the dancer’s similes, in other words, pertains to the relationship between the geometries of the plane and the sphere as viewed from the outside, the second figures this same relationship as viewed from within. The situation in most other respects is remarkably similar, for what is at stake in both cases is the power of a certain kind of curvature to encompass and thus to represent infinite trajectories, in a way that proves impossible for traditional, Euclidian representations of space. Like the point at the North Pole of the sphere, whose projection into the plane occurs at the “place” where all linear representation comes to an end, the relevant points on the concave mirror produce linear reflections that correspond to no conventional image. Only in a spherical geometry, which distorts the rigid purity of Euclidian linearity as the Hohlspiegel distorts its object, does the rupture of infinity enter the optical realm as part of a mathematically manipulable whole. The site where this reconciliation occurs, and which, in the case of stereographic projection, does indeed carry the mathematical predicate “ideal,” thus provides Kleist with a powerful lens through which to reenvision, by way of analogy, the late 18th century philosophical notion of ideality. In the reflected light of the dancer’s two optical models, the moral ideal of a mind-matter harmony appears not as the unreachable end of an infinite task, but as a function of the transformative mapping, the dynamic pro-jec-tion, that translates one domain of relations into another. The familiar, linear structure of a dichotomous first/last, with its attendant prioritization of an ostensibly originary unconsciousness, gives way here to the fundamentally spherical solution of a simultaneous
“both/and,” where soul and body converge as they could never do from a more conventional—because, in Kleist’s terms, less truly aesthetic—Euclidian perspective.

III.

The question of what such a transformative mapping, within the realm of the mind-matter interaction, might actually look like—and, even more crucially, of why such a shift should be considered aesthetically desirable—receives a detailed, two-part answer over the course of the dancer’s discourse on marionette mechanics, with which the whole fictionalized dialogue begins. Here, again, a coherent account of the various things the dancer actually says about these mechanics will require us to ignore, or, rather, to reject outright, the interpretation he himself offers of their meaning, since the absence of consciousness he celebrates as redemptive turns out to play no role at all in his description of a graceful puppet dance. The marionette moves, the dancer explains, in accordance with a rule of translation that transforms a linear movement of its internal, gravitational center into a curved movement of its external, pendular limbs. Translation of this kind is the work of a mathematical function, as he makes clear when he compares the relationship between the two movements to that of an asymptote to its hyperbola, or numbers to their logarithms—two cases where a line, when exposed to the function in question, produces a predictable, mathematically describable curve. Because all lines yield some kind of curve, it is “often” the case that, “auf eine bloß zufällige Weise erschüttert, das Ganze schon in eine Art von rhythmische Bewegung käme, die dem Tanz ähnlich wäre” (M 318). Mechanically speaking, then, the manipulation of a marionette is a simple affair, requiring little in the way of actual physical dexterity. The art of puppeteering, however, requires a mental ability to predict which
lines will yield which curves. The *Maschinist* must develop a deep, intuitive sense for the logic of the function that relates the center to the extremities.

Here is what the dancer has to say about the nature of this task, as reported by the narrator:

Die Linie, die der Schwerpunkt zu beschreiben hat, wäre zwar sehr einfach, und, wie er glaube, in den meisten Fällen, gerad. In Fällen, wo sie krumm sei, scheine das Gesetz ihrer Krümmung wenigstens von der ersten oder höchstens zweiten Ordnung […] Dagegen wäre diese Linie wieder, von einer anderen Seite, etwas sehr Geheimnisvolles. Denn sie wäre nichts anders, als der Weg der Seele des Tänzers; und er zweifle, daß sie anders gefunden werden könne, als dadurch, daß sich der Maschinist in den Schwerpunkt der Marionette versetzt, d.h. mit anderen Worten, tanzt. (318-19)

Despite the mystical-sounding language of secrets and souls, the passage actually provides a perfectly concrete, and indeed almost technical description of the physical conditions required for the production of a truly graceful dance. To discover the function that determines the line-curve relation, the puppeteer must bring himself and his movements—here aligned with the “soul” or moving force (“vis motrix”) of the constellation—into consonance with the gravitational center of the puppet’s wooden body. Doing so will allow him to “ex-press” said soul in the most literal of all possible senses, since the presence of a propulsive force in the interior of the marionette is what ultimately acquires visible shape in the exterior phenomenon of the dance. Doing so will also allow him to actualize with absolutely absurd precision Schiller’s own understanding of the soul’s proper role in the graceful movement of human beings: “wo also Anmut stattfindet,” Schiller writes in *Anmut und Würde*, “da ist die Seele das bewegende Prinzip und in ihr ist der Grund von der Schönheit der Bewegung enthalten” (AW 255).

The *difference* between the Kleistian model and its Schillerian precedent has, therefore, nothing to do with some imaginary absence of spirit or soul, and everything to do with the foreignness of the body to be, as it were, ensouled. The physis which the puppeteer must come to inhabit, and into which he must therefore displace himself, is not his own, and this very fact is what counter-intuitively enables his transformation from ungraceful human to grace-generating
Pourciau

artist. A second example involving prosthesis-wearing dancers in England, which the dancer inserts into the middle of his discourse about the marionettes, makes this point even more forcefully, since it obviously makes little sense to presume that a prosthesis implies an intellectual deficit. These dancers lack legs, not brains, and their movements differ from those of their “normal” human counterparts by virtue of the mechanical-organic fusion they presuppose, which results in the marionette-like display of “dead” limbs being subjected to the aesthetic ambitions of a living human mind. That mind, of course, must first learn the technical means of manipulating its foreign, mechanical element before it can impose its expressive will. Kleist’s dancer’s second, parodistic literalization of a Schillerian image—namely, the image of grace as crutch or substitute ("Stütze und Stellvertreterin” [AW 276]), supplementing the natural beauty of the intact human body—thus involves yet another highly conscious process of translation, rendered necessary by the foundational hybridity of the aesthetic phenomenon.

The notion of art as an act of translation, in the most literal sense of trans-latio and metaphor—as a ferrying across from one space to another, and so also as the deformative displacement of a soul-decentering Sich Versetzen—recalls quite clearly the mathematical transition from plane to sphere. Like the rigorous geometrical transformations that metamorphose Euclidean into spherical space, and in doing so distort beyond recognition all “natural” relationships of distance and direction, the aesthetic calculus rewrites the “natural” relationship of mind to matter. The result is a new ideal of intersection, one that takes the mind-matter schism to its logical and literal extreme before subjecting it to the spectacle of a carefully calibrated, and deformative, mediation. The implicit thesis of the dancer’s geometrical analogies is therefore as follows: The alternative space of a spherical geometry, with its capacity to represent the rupture of infinity, makes possible a more powerful mathematics, in which much
can take place that would be impossible on the plane. Similarly, the alternative space of a corresponding aesthetics, with its capacity to display the rupture of mind and matter, makes possible a more powerful practice of the dancer’s art, in which much can be exhibited that remains unthinkable from the perspective of either “real” life or Idealist philosophy.

It remains to establish the sense in which this latter claim might hold—over and above the sense in which the marionettes can be said to perform a transformative distortion of humanity’s gestural “space”—since a deformation that proves mathematically productive need not be expected, on the basis of analogical reasoning alone, to generate any salutary aesthetic effects within the realm of human expression. Just because the marionettes distort stereographically, in other words, does not imply that they also do so beautifully. Wherein lie the specifically aesthetic advantages, for an art of physical movement, of hybridity over wholeness, dislocation over autochthony? And what do these advantages signify, in turn, for an attempt to reconceive the task of art as such, since the beautiful dance, in an Idealist theory of grace, functions primarily as a figure for the production of aesthetic effects in general? I will begin with an answer to the first question, which I think can be fairly straightforwardly inferred from the second half of the dancer C.’s discourse on the marionettes, before moving on, in the fourth and final section of this discussion, to the deeply problematic second question, with its implications for the possibility of an anti-Idealist, mathematically-informed theory of metaphor.

The marionettes’ primary aesthetic advantage over their fallen human counterparts, according to the dancer, is that they do not act artificially with the intent to seduce. The German verb is sich zieren, literally “to decorate oneself” with jewels or other external accessories that glitter (zielen comes from the Indoeuropean roots *dēir-, *dēr- meaning “to shine”), in the service of attracting attention from others. Against the backdrop of Idealist notions about grace,
the frippery in question corresponds to a particular category of inessential bodily movements, whose purpose is to reel in, and so to displace, other souls, rather than to directly express, and so to harmoniously embody, the mover’s own. Such movements lend to the mover the false sheen of mere semblance rather than the true shine of reflected spiritual splendor. The dancer articulates the physical mechanics of this semblance as follows: “Denn Ziererei erscheint, wie Sie wissen, wenn sich die Seele (vis motrix) in irgendeinem andern Punkte befindet, als in dem Schwerpunkt der Bewegung […]” (M 322). Instead of the “Weg der Seele des Tanzers,” in other words, which brings the moving force into coincidence with the corporeal Schwerpunkt of the hybrid movement, we have here the passivity of a “sich befinden,” which would appear to simply leave the soul where it by nature lies. The impression of stasis, however, is deceptive, since this condition of non-coincidence clearly has little to do with a lack of volition—or motivation—that would somehow keep the soul from changing places. Rather, it is itself the result of a spiritual dislocation, to which, it now becomes clear, the dislocation performed by the puppeteer is intended to provide the corrective.

The dancer goes on to give two telling examples from this category of aesthetic misstep:

Sehen Sie nur die P…an, fuhr er fort, wenn sie die Daphne spielt, und sich, verfolgt vom Apoll, nach ihm umsieht; die Seele sitzt ihr in den Wirbeln des Kreuzes […] Sehen Sie den jungen F… an, wenn er, als Paris, unter den drei Göttinnen steht, und der Venus den Apfel überreicht: die Seele sitzt ihm gar (es ist ein Schrecken, es zu sehen) im Ellenbogen. (322)

Daphne and Apollo, Paris and Venus, the one turning around to catch a glimpse of her amorous pursuer, the other reaching out to the most desirable of all goddesses, and both with their souls prominently out of balance: such erotically charged gestures of reaching out and turning toward, which can retain their intensity only so long as they fail to “land” on their object, such vectors of

15 My reading of the gestural dynamics at work in Kleist’s text, and their relationship to the Idealist interpretation of the Sündenfall, corresponds closely to Helmut Schneider’s excellent analysis thereof in “Deconstruction and the Hermeneutical Body” (see note 3). For other approaches to the role of the Schillerian backdrop, see Strässle, Die keilförmige Vernunft (note 2), pp. 180-210, and Greiner, Kleists Dramen und Erzählungen (note 2), pp. 197-219.
attraction and repulsion, trace the necessarily asymmetrical trajectory of unconsummated desire.

And they do so, despite the dancer’s own, reflexively Idealist, superficially *geschichts* philosophical interpretation, within the gestural space opened up by the originary, Eden-transcending transgression.

Solche Mißgriffe, setzte er abbrechend hinzu, sind unvermeidlich, seitdem wir von dem Baum der Erkenntnis gegessen haben. Doch das Paradies ist verriegelt und der Cherub hinter uns; wir müssen die Reise um die Welt machen, und sehen, ob es vielleicht von hinten irgendwo wieder offen ist. (322-3)

The implication, here, from the dancer’s perspective, is that we would go backward if we could, and that the pre-Fall enclosure of the garden, now rendered inaccessible, at least from one direction, was impervious to such boundary-defying deformations. Yet as Helmut Schneider has pointed out, it was in fact a double “Mißgriff” of precisely this kind that first precipitated the Fall.16 Eve reaches out a hand to grasp the forbidden fruit, and then again, in the original, iconic gesture of seduction (here mirrored quite precisely by the young dancer playing Paris), in order to tempt her partner, Adam. The ostensibly inviolate space of the garden thus proves no impediment to the execution of her dangerously vector-shaped acts, which means, in turn, that the possibility of her transgression must have been built into the “geometry” of human experience from the beginning. The organic harmony of mind and matter, regardless of what the dancer C. would have us believe, was never safe.

A submerged reflection on the consequences of this inescapable dynamic of desire for an Idealist aesthetics of human grace provides one of the most interesting subtexts in Schiller’s subtext-rich exploration of the phenomenon. Grace ensues, in *Anmut und Würde*, whenever the embodied expression of a disembodied interiority occurs in accordance with the conditions of sensual beauty. A graceful movement is a kind of corporeal speech that conforms simultaneously

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to both moral and natural rules, thereby achieving a momentary state of near-magical harmony between the two otherwise disconnected realms (AW 273-4). In order, however, for a physical movement to be able to fully and immediately express the essence of the human spirit, the movement itself must remain involuntary. Otherwise, it could express only the accident of a particular, contingent volition. Schiller consequently goes to great rhetorical lengths to keep separate what he conceives as the true, unintentional grace from the “imitative or learned grace” (AW 269) that intentionally appears unintentional. The distinction turns out to coincide—not coincidentally—with the introduction of eros into a previously dispassionate discussion of aesthetic categories.

Daraus ersieht man auch beiläufig, was man von der nachgeahmten oder gelernten Anmut (die ich die theatralische und die Tanzmeistergrazie nennen möchte) zu halten habe. Sie ist ein würdiges Gegenstück zu derjenigen Schönheit, die am Putztisch aus Karmin und Bleiweiß, falschen Locken [...] und Wallfischrippen hervorgeht [...] Auf einen ungeübten Sinn können beide völlig denselben Effekt machen, wie das Original, das sie nachahmen; und ist die Kunst groß, so kann sie auch zuweilen den Kenner betrügen. Aber aus irgendeinem Zug blickt endlich doch der Zwang und die Absicht hervor, und dann ist Gleichgültigkeit, wo nicht gar Verachtung und Ekel, die unvermeidliche Folge. [...] Wie sollten wir, wenn wir auch die Wirkung verzeihen könnten, den Betrug nicht verachten? – Sobald wir merken, dass die Anmut erkünstelt ist, so schließt sich plötzlich unser Herz, und zurück flieht die ihr entgegenwallende Seele. (AW 269-70)

The verbal excess suggests, perhaps, a desire to compensate with vehemence for the absence of a clear, conceptual criterion that could here be applied to distinguish between intentional and unintentional grace. Because the real problem, from Schiller’s perspective, is not that it is sometimes hard to draw the distinction, or that once we have drawn it we sometimes feel deceived, but that, aesthetically, and thus also philosophically speaking, we have no right to draw it at all. Physical movement need only appear graceful to the observer in order to legitimately qualify as grace, a fact that Schiller explicitly, if parenthetically, admits in the sentence immediately preceding this passage: “Grazie hingegen muss jederzeit Natur, d.i. unwillkürlich sein (wenigstens so scheinen), und das Subjekt selbst darf nie so aussehen, als wenn es um seine
Anmut wüsste” (AW 269). Schiller’s contemptuous response to the idea of “false shining” must therefore be read, against his own instructions, as a descriptive commentary on the subjective effects of discovering deceit, rather than as a general, philosophically valid condemnation of all grace-generating artifice. The potentially erotic connotations of the German Betrug, with its whiff of infidelity—highlighted, here, by the image of a closing heart and a recoiling soul—remind us as readers that we feel more cheated by a deception we discover than by one which we do not. Such feelings, however, cannot in themselves be expected to provide an objective aesthetic foundation for privileging “true” over “false” manifestations of grace.

Clearly, then, the aesthetic category of beautiful human movement, together with the philosophical ideal of harmony it was intended to realize, remains—post-Schiller—deeply threatened by the presence of this debased, eroticized double from which it cannot even in theory be differentiated. And since, according to Kleist’s dancer, the ineliminable danger of corporeal self-expression necessarily culminates in the unbalanced form of the wayward linear gesture—as iconographically represented by Eve’s original sinful reaching (“solche Misgriffe”)—it stands to reason that a properly aesthetic, i.e. harmoniously balanced solution would turn out to require the “spherification” of the human gestural field. On the sphere, as in Kleist’s dancer’s models of an alternative grace, the asymmetrical geometry of desire becomes quite literally unrepresentable. There are no lines, and therefore no un-recuperable vectors, no one-directional arrows falling off into infinity, and no indefinitely deferred intersections in a world where the very space has curvature. Similarly: there can be no seductively outstretched arms, no transgressive grasping beyond the enclosure of the spectacle, in a world where the artist’s most linear intentions only ever express themselves as curves. The very limitation imposed by the foreignness of the actor’s “body”—the fact that the wooden limbs will only move when the force that motivates them
springs directly from the “heart”—makes erotic affectation impossible, since the soul that does not align with its _Schwerpunkt_, and that therefore does not express its true motivating force, will have no discernible effect at all.

The result of this “spherification” is not a wholly _new_ understanding of grace, any more than the result of the stereographic projection is a wholly new understanding of space. Nor, however, is it a purely parodic disavowal of the Idealist model, as the dancer’s point-by-point perversion of Schiller might at first seem to suggest. Rather: the logic of the marionettes is that of a _corrective_ distortion, which undermines the illusory ideal of an unconscious, unmediated harmony by turning the mind-matter rupture itself, together with the process of its profoundly conscious, profoundly technological mediation, into the true content of the theatrical spectacle. (The technical skill of the puppeteer, who remains visible as he manipulates his marionette “prostheses,” is for this reason always an integral part of the show.) Such a model of theater, which revels in the world-altering power of its own, transformed and transformative optic, clearly has no need for the pretense of a dissimulated fourth wall. It foregrounds the aesthetic effects of its operations openly, like a curved, funhouse mirror, whose images, when compared with those of its conventional, planar equivalent, appear deformed—almost, but not quite—beyond recognition. And the notion that these deformations might ultimately offer more insight into the true form(s) of the Real than even the most unvarnished, undistorted, rectilinear approach to representation is the provocatively anti-Kantian message of the marionette discourse. It is here, at the point where the question of representational power comes into view, that Kleist’s mathematically-informed reinterpretation of grace turns out to intersect, as I will go on to show in the final section, with his mathematically-informed reconceptualization of metaphor.
IV.

The entwinement of metaphor and aesthetics is the subject of paragraph 59, entitled “Von der Schönheit als Symbol der Sittlichkeit,” in Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Kant himself does not use the word metaphor, which, for his purposes, would be simultaneously too broad (the traditional Aristotelian definition encompasses any rhetorical practice of “transferring” a word from its expected context to another, less obvious one) and too narrow (the traditional definition pertains only to the representational capacities of *words*). Kant does, however, deploy the term “hypotyposis” (from *hypo*, beneath, and *typoun*, to stamp, to impress, with the literal meaning of “sketch” or “outline”), as well as that of “analogy” (from *ana*, upon, according to and *logos*, relation or ratio, with the mathematical meaning of a 1:1 ratio between ratios) both of which play meaningful roles in the development of metaphor theory from Aristotle onward.18

The notion of analogy, which Kant uses to characterize the cognitive mode of the symbol, furnishes Aristotle with his account of how the best metaphors operate: just as, in geometry, one finds quantitative “relationships of proportion” such that a given ratio a:b can be set equal to another ratio c:d, so, in rhetoric, should one seek to establish identities among qualitative relations, of the form “cup is in relation to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares.”19 The notion of *hypotyposis*, which Kant glosses as “Darstellung, subiectio ad adspectum,” refers to Aristotle’s

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further prioritization of analogies that compare actions rather than completed entities. When a metaphor analogizes in a manner neither too opaque nor too obvious, according to Aristotle, it contributes to easy learning, and thus gives pleasure. When a metaphor additionally manages to analogize in a way that infuses its content with life, by “setting before the eyes” (pro ommatón poiein) of its audience the dynamism of active becoming rather than the stasis of existing being, it achieves the pinnacle of rhetorical success.

By “setting before the eyes” I mean using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity (energeia). [...] So with Homer’s common practice of giving metaphorical life to lifeless things: all such passages are distinguished by the effect of activity they convey. [...] Here everything is represented as moving and living; and activity is movement.20

This principle of a life-bestowing “making visible” through metaphor is what ultimately becomes known, in the post-Aristotelian rhetorical tradition, under the name of hypotyposis, with the result that the word’s primary meaning of “sketch” or “outline”—i.e. of literal figuration—expands to include the broader, secondary meaning of “vivid figurative presentation.” Both senses of the Greek term then get taken up, in turn, by the Latin exhibitio and the German Darstellung, such that the most important German dictionary of Kant’s time, Johann Christian Adelung’s Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart (1774-1786), can define the verb “darstellen” as a physical or rhetorical operation of “setting before the eyes”: “Darstellen, verb. reg. act. vor Augen stellen, gegenwärtig machen. 1) Eigentlich, körperlich vor

Augen stellen [...] 2) Figürlich, abbilden [...] In gleichen, dem Geiste auf eine lebhafe Art gegenwärtig machen.\(^2\)

Kant clearly has this double conceptual lineage in mind when he introduces his own definition of hypotyposis, or *Darstellung*, as an umbrella concept capable of encompassing both direct and indirect modes of exhibition. Exhibition, in this context, refers specifically to the task of linking concepts to intuitions, which means also, to the sensible data of reality, along the lines required by the famous dictum from the first Critique:

Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind. Daher ist es eben so notwendig, seine Begriffe sinnlich zu machen (d. i. ihnen den Gegenstand in der Anschauung beizufügen), als, seine Anschauungen sich verständlich zu machen (d. i. sie unter Begriffe zu bringen) [...] Nur daraus, daß sie sich vereinigen, kann Erkenntnis entspringen.\(^2\)

“Direct” exhibitions, of the kind required for true knowledge, are possible only for those concepts of the understanding that pertain by their very nature to the domain of sensory experience. Such exhibitions take place with the help of a “schema” (literally “sketch” or “outline”), as described in the section of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* titled “Von dem Schematismus der reinen Verstandesbegriffe.” They infuse concepts with the *energeia* of concrete, sensory content, and, in doing so, grant them the vitality of fully actualized cognition.\(^2\)

Indirect exhibitions, on the other hand, are required for those concepts of reason (“ideas”) that pertain to the supersensory domain, a realm that encompasses, for Kant, the sphere of morality, freedom of the will, actual infinity, and the systematic unity of the universe. Such


\(^{23}\)The question of how, exactly, the process of schematization works is one that continues to occupy Kant scholars. For a particularly rigorous and influential treatment of the issues concerned, including an expansive investigation into the relationship between Kant’s theory of judgment and his philosophy of mathematics, see Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the*
exhibitions can take place only by way of a “symbol,” whose function is structurally analogous to that of the schema (as vivid figurative presentation is structurally analogous to literal figuration), and whose particular characteristics Kant unfolds in paragraph 59.

Where the schema, in other words, can simply set before the “mind’s eye” an intuition of the real object(s) to which a particular concept of the understanding refers, the symbol has no such recourse. Like Aristotle’s privileged metaphors, Kant’s indirect exhibitions must rather strive to make virtually present what is actually absent, and in doing so to provide the appearance of life to what would otherwise remain a mere lifeless abstraction. The object of the concept “God,” for instance, or of the ideal political state, would have no cognitive content at all without the analogies that tie them symbolically back to experience. But since we can “visualize” the relationship between Creator and creation, as conceived but not intuited in the concept of a life-bestowing “God,” by way of an analogy with the relationship between watchmaker and watch; and since we can similarly make present to ourselves the nonexistent ideal of ultimate political harmony, in the relationship between a sovereign and his people, by way of an analogy with the relationship between mind and body, we can continue to make limited, practical use of such supersensible concepts despite our fundamental inability to directly “picture” their objects.  

25 Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft (see note 24), p. 352. It is presumably not irrelevant that Kant’s suggested symbol for a tyrannically-governed state is a hand mill. Kleist’s dancer’s fantasy of a fully disensouled, because fully automated
The result is not knowledge, like the results of binding a concept to an intuition through a schema. But it is not not knowledge either, as would be the case if sensory intuition were permitted to play no role at all.26 Concepts without intuitions are empty, and concepts that compensate for this emptiness by entering into a second-order, analogical relation with a different concept-intuition pair, borrowed from the realm of sensory experience, do not thereby magically acquire any sensory substance of their own. (We still don’t know anything, once we have thought our way through the analogy of God to watchmaker, about what God actually is.) Such concepts do, however, acquire a relationally-determinate position with respect to the world of what can be known. The operation performed by God vis-à-vis His creation can be intuited to correspond to the operation of the watchmaker vis-à-vis the watch, such that we now at least have a sense of “where” we would need to go “looking” for the object “God,” if God were indeed the sort of object that could be captured by our mental “gaze.” Since God cannot, in fact, be represented by the intuition, any more than the infinite can be comprehended in a single act of imaging, symbolic exhibition will not eventually give way to the schematic, no matter how faithfully we follow the lead of our analogies. Indirect knowledge of the supersensory will never become direct, which is another way of saying that in such cases the regulative use of reason will never tip over into the constitutive.

Kleist’s Marionettentheater, I believe, seeks to performatively undermine this extraordinarily influential Kantian opposition, whose problematic implications for the production of art had already prompted Friedrich Schiller to tackle the topic of grace. At stake for both writers is the ability of aesthetic experience to mediate symbolically, as Kant’s third Critique claims it does, marionette, which would be manipulated by means of a hand crank, appears even more dubious when viewed against this backdrop.
between the realms of the sensible and the supersensible, which means also, between the domains of material necessity and spiritual freedom, mechanical causation and teleological purpose, reality and the moral ideas. This mediation only occurs, for Kant, insofar as the aesthetic phenomenon remains unsubsumable to any conceptual rule whatsoever, i.e. to any determinate sense on the part of the beholder of what the object in question might actually be and be for. The beautiful operates as a symbol for the moral because it suspends the dynamic of purely contingent, conditional interest—i.e. of “heteronomy,” whether sensual or intellectual—which otherwise governs every interaction between the experiencing subject and the world.27

And this means that the beautiful also operates as a symbol for the order of the symbolized more generally, in a way that the watch and the organism do not. Judgments about beauty are reflective rather than determinative, according to Kant’s terminology, because they involve an intuition that can only ever be analogically, rather than schematically, linked to a concept. The structure of such judgments thus symbolically reflects, at the level of empirical experience, the equally indeterminate structure of symbolic judgments about the supersensible, whose concepts can only ever be analogically linked to intuitions. The actual “content” of the beauty-morality analogy, which accounts for its privileged status within the context of Kant’s theory of judgment, is the (empty) form of the analogical relation itself.28

26 Kant aligns this latter position with Deism, which seeks to eliminate everything intuitive from its approach to the infinitude of the All, and in doing so closes itself off to knowledge of the practical as well as the theoretical kind. See Kritik der Urteilskraft (note 24), pp. 352-3.
28 Kant makes clear, in the passage cited above (“das Verfahren der Urteilskraft [kommt] demjenigen, was sie im Schematisieren beobachtet, bloß analogisch, d.i. mit ihm bloß [...] der Form der Reflexion, nicht dem Inhalte nach, über ein”), that symbolization is a matter of going through the formal motions of schematization without the content of an actual schematic rule for tying this formal structure back to an object. Only in the case of beauty, however, does the formal emptiness of the symbolic judgment become the content—or symbolized meaning—of the symbol itself. For a far more expansive and, hence, far more precise treatment than I have the space to unfold here of the content-form relationship entailed by the Kantian symbol, see, in addition to Rodolphe Gasché, The Idea of Form (note 18), Alexander Rueger and Sahan Evren, “The Role of Symbolic Presentation in Kant’s Theory of Taste”, in:
The problem with this astonishingly intricate proliferation of analogies, from the perspective of art producers like Schiller and Kleist, is that the structural symmetry of Kantian beauty—depending as it does on the utter absence, or at least irrelevance, of any specific purpose or content—leaves no room for an art that seeks to actively move its beholder. Kant is famously vague on the question of what a beautiful object should look like, as well as of what kinds of artistic practices or approaches might be expected to generate one. But where the concept of the object as object gets bracketed out of the account altogether, together with the question of its role in the network of natural causes and human purposes, the aesthetic encounter necessarily acquires for the subject the inexplicable and unpredictable character of a miracle. The beholder’s sudden experience of a proportional harmony, or analogy, among her faculties—the wondrous equilibrium of “free play”—gestures beyond itself toward the possibility of other, more cosmic harmonies, precisely because it says nothing whatsoever about the real-world conditions, natural or artistic, out of which this particular experience emerges. To insist that it do otherwise, as Schiller does when he claims that the subjective experience of free play testifies to the objective presence of “Freiheit in der Erscheinung,” is to transgress against the Kantian Bilderverbot. True freedom is infinite, and the infinite cannot appear directly within the finite world of our experience, no matter how often the miracle of free play reminds us to indirectly envision it as a regulative idea of reason.

Kleist’s Marionettentheater, I am arguing, follows Schiller in taking issue with the Kantian Bilderverbot—which of course means, also, with the corresponding Kantian theories of metaphor.
and beauty—but it does so at a level far more foundational than Schiller’s essentially unsystematic act of defiance, because it takes aim at the doctrine’s finitist heart. The concept of a completed infinity, according to Kant, cannot be represented by an intuition: no schema or rule of construction exists that could fill this concept with determinate content. Pure mathematics, as analyzed in the _Kritik der reinen Vernunft_, comes closer than any other discipline to transforming the infinite into a legitimate object of thought, since geometry and arithmetic presuppose for their operations the underlying infinities of the spatial and temporal continua, respectively. These operations have become more and more powerful throughout the centuries: by Kant’s time, the static structure of the proportional analogy, which captures a relationship between two particular relations or ratios, has long since given way to the dynamic structure of an analytic formula or “function,” which captures a relationship between changes in one set of relations to changes in another.29 Whereas the traditional analogy expresses an isolated truth about a privileged equilibrium within a given domain—one can solve, given three quantitative terms, for an unknown fourth proportional—the modern function concept gives access to an unlimited swath of calculable relations, since it dictates that as \( x \) changes, \( f(x) \) results. From Kant’s perspective, however, this unlimited swath is only ever potentially infinite, in the sense that one could in principle continue to plug new \( x \)-terms into the formula indefinitely. The function concept allows us to pose mathematically meaningful questions, for instance, about what “happens” to \( f(x) \) as \( x \) itself grows arbitrarily large. It does not provide us with a schematic rule, or formula, for representing an actually infinite mathematical object, since infinite magnitudes, in themselves, can never become either the input or the output term of such an

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expression. On Kant’s view, therefore, a thought that seeks to establish a relationship between finite and infinite terms—like the thought of beauty as a symbol of the supersensible—will always need to revert to the static fourfold of traditional analogy, in which the formal equality can but need not—and, in the case of infinity, will not—presuppose any underlying commonality of measure.

Kleist’s text challenges this Kantian principle by offering up two examples in which the infinite, as such, does enter the realm of mathematical representation. Both instances belong to a category of function that generalizes the 18th century mathematical understanding of relations-among-relations in order to include higher-order relations among entire domains of relations. Where the traditional function, for instance, might link changes in position $f(x)$ to changes in time $x$—thereby expressing a relationship that can be graphically represented, within the Euclidian plane, by a one-dimensional arc or line—the relevant function in the case of stereographic projection links the two-dimensional Euclidian plane as a whole to the surface of a three-dimensional sphere. The result is a meta-model of the relationship between two different representational models: a straightforwardly mimetic, Euclidian version of “reality,” for which infinity plays the role of horizon or limit, metamorphoses here, according to the strict and reversible rules of a one-to-one mathematical mapping, into a correctively deformed, non-Euclidian vision of “ideality,” for which infinity plays the role of north pole. Such a mapping

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29 For an overview of the development of the function concept, and its relationship to the idea of an “analytic expression” or “formula,” from the 17th through the 19th centuries, see F. A. Medvedev, Scenes from the History of Real Functions, trans. Roger Cooke, Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1991 (originally 1975), pp. 25-81.

contravenes Kant’s dictum regarding the impossibility of “picturing” infinity via a definitional rule or schema, but it also, by the same token, suggests the possibility of a new and profoundly un-Kantian understanding of aesthetics. If, according to Kant, the structure of analogy, in general, and the privileged analogical structure of beauty, in particular, becomes relevant primarily at the limits of a finite cognition, in the nomansland where the structure of conceptual schematization necessarily fails; if, further, modern mathematics has now demonstrated that this nomansland *can*, in fact, be rendered susceptible, within the domain of quantity, to the conceptual schema of an analytic formula or function: then, reasons Kleist, Kant’s cautious, analogical model of aesthetics, which takes its cues from a pre-modern, finitist approach to quantity, might also prove outdated with respect to the domain of quality.

The consequences of the proposed rethinking are radical, and characteristically Kleistian: An aesthetics conceived to correspond, in its representation of qualitative relations, to the transformative thrust of a projective geometry—which forcibly displaces an entire relational domain onto the coordinates of an alternative representational space—will necessarily differ drastically from an aesthetics conceived according to the ancient principles of proportional harmony, in which a small group of miraculously stable equilibriums timelessly reflect each other across the asymmetries of worldly flux. The essence of beauty, on the projective model, will no longer reside in the crystalline clarity of a form that eschews all concrete content, but in the dynamic power of an operation that bends all concrete content to its formal will. The task of the artist will no longer consist in intuitively imitating the accidents of a purposeless yet mysteriously purposive nature, by distilling (or dissimulating) away the heteronomic forces of particular interests, but rather, in conceptually absorbing and transmuting the totality of these various, idiosyncratic pushes and pulls—the unbalanced back and forth of human desire—until
the same expressive substance reappears, correctly deformed, within the enclosure of an aesthetically “compactified” space.

Kleist’s oeuvre abounds with examples of such transformative violence: one could think, for instance, of Der zerbrochene Krug and the comedic spectacle of multiple, vector-shaped “falls,” curving back around under the operational pressure of puns to “intersect” at a point where the physical and the spiritual, the profane and the theological, turn out to converge. One could think, also and perhaps even more obviously, of Das Erdbeben in Chili, where a seismic shift in the foundations of the real quite literally makes room for reconciliation—in the form of a paradiasiacal idyll that draws the families of aristocrats and outcasts together—while a second, equally brutal twist prepares the way for a further transition: the traditional harmony model represented by the two, strictly analogous families, and the chiastic equilibrium of their progression toward the church, cedes priority, after multiple murders, to its deliberately warped Kleistian counterpart, which projects the natural family onto an artificial one, and real pain onto hypothetical pleasure (“so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen”).

Perhaps the most concentrated performance, however, of a mathematically-inspired, anti-Kantian mode of metapherein can be found toward the end of the Marionettentheater itself, in the dancer’s story about a fencing bear. The episode has elicited countless interpretations in the scholarly literature, according to which the bear variously appears as God, as a “super-reader,” or as joke, but I want to suggest, here, by way of conclusion, that the notion of a stereographic aesthetics opens up the possibility of a new and different hermeneutic approach. The two-

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tiered anecdote opens, at the boundaries of European civilization (we are told that the dancer was “on his way to Russia”), with the description of a duel. The combatants are the dancer and the young son of his aristocratic, Livonian host, and it takes place in the boy’s bedroom. The various ways in which this mock battle recalls the two other, erotically-charged dyads figured in the text—between the narrator and the young boy in the bath, as described in the narrator’s anecdote, and between the narrator and the dancer, as enacted over the course of their discussion—have not escaped the notice of commentators. Fencing provides an apt metaphor for the conversational exercise, where the point is to prevail over the other through a display of rhetorical dexterity, and where neither party remains above the deception involved in the rhetorical feint, so long as it serves the ultimate goal of persuading the other to surrender to the self. The Russian boy’s passionate self-destruction, set in motion by the dancer, furnishes in this context yet another example of a supposedly disinterested play of grace falling pray to affectation.

With the end of this first match, however, the scene changes rather dramatically. The intimacy of the dual constellation is shattered by the unexpectedly raucous behavior of the boy’s several brothers who have apparently been standing there, watching, the entire time, and who now begin “laughing loudly and shouting” as though they were already the spectators of a bear-baiting match. In the next moment, the dancer finds himself face to face with a chained bear; the brothers, standing nearby to observe the spectacle they have organized, goad the dancer into striking, and the dance begins.


The stage at first appears set for a battle of the paradigms in accordance with the interpretive preferences articulated by the dancer over the course of his conversation with the narrator. On the one side stands an extraordinarily graceful human, highly skilled in the twin arts of dancing and fencing, sure of his talents and unused to surrender. On the other stands the bear, as a model of unconscious, inhuman grace. The dancer, like any proper representative of his species, wishes to have his way with the bear, to lure the animal into his power by striking a series of seductive and receptive poses. He therefore aims rather unsubtly at the breast: site of the heart and vulnerable symbol of human intimacy. The bear, however, does not fall for his feints, does not lapse into the alternating cycle of offers and acceptances that delineates the pattern of subjective expression. The animal responds to the dancer’s attempts as though controlled by a function, and thus remains inaccessible to the attack waged by the human representative of an expressivist, eroticized aesthetic.

Those commentators who refuse to take the bear seriously as an example of alternative grace, on the grounds that bears are not graceful animals, and that the parrying movement of a paw does not qualify this particular one as an exception, are probably correct but have, I think, missed the point. For the point is that the bear on his own actually offers nothing—meaning also: no alternative, and no paradigm—since without the active involvement of the dancer there would in fact be no spectacle at all. Only the dancer’s thrusts can engender the bear’s answering movements; it is he who controls the animal’s entirely predictable responses, and thus he who effectively “pulls the strings.” The true representation of an alternative grace must therefore be seen to reside, not in the bear itself, but in the hybrid constellation of the fencing match.

34 Helmut Scheider, too, views the bear as a counterpart to the marionette, though it remains somewhat unclear, in his account, who is actually controlling the animal’s movements. “Deconstruction and the Hermeneutical Body” (note 3), pp. 225-6.
conceived as a whole, which simultaneously reflects and deforms the more conventional dyadic interaction that precedes it, as though the entire scene were being replayed anew inside the curved geometry of the concave mirror: the dancer’s magnified and profoundly distorted bear-image moves only when he does, and then only enough to come up and “meet” the thrusts it thereby, in the most literal of senses, deflects. The analogy according to which the whole narrative is structured—the analogy of “Livonian boy : dancer = dancer: fencing bear”—acquires the additional significance, across the doubled appearance of the dancer, of a metaphorical-mathematical “carrying over,” or projection, from one side of the equation to the other—and so also, from one model of analogy to another—such that the “ratio” (Greek: logos) of the first duel becomes the input of which the “ratio” of the second is the output.

The resulting spectacle emerges victorious, not because the bear defeats the dancer (an impossibility in any case, since the bear never once attacks), but because the narrative itself forces the dancer, along with the “half joking, half sensitive” hypocrisy of the traditional relational model he represents, into conformity with its rule-governed transformation of the traditional relational domain. The dancer succumbs against his will to the foreign rhythms of this hybrid dance, until even the dissimulating affectations of his feints become absorbed into the compactified space of the twice-marginalized “Holzstall,” while, at a different level, the misguidedly subjectivist thrust of the dancer’s narration, and of his dialogic duel with the narrator more generally, get subsumed into the “curved” surface of Kleist’s text. The dancer’s final anecdote thus provides, on my reading, the most fitting of all conceivable preludes to the figures of spherical deformation with which the Marionettentheater concludes, and a persuasive testament to the power of a stereographically-conceived aesthetics: an aesthetics in which the “literal” space of the Euclidean plane, together with its Kantian symbols, turns out to exist only
as the derivative modification—as the shadowy projection—of a more powerful, more sophisticated, and more beautiful geometry.