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Heinrich von Kleist and the Problem of Actuality

Paradise Through the Wrong Door

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to pull at the strand of the problematic actual which, I will argue, underpins the works of Heinrich von Kleist. I argue that Kleist identifies actuality as a problem inherent in Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, but rather than being blindsided by the Kantian philosophy as he claims in his 'crisis' of 1801, he brought this issue into his reading (or misreading as many call it) of Kant. As the mode of judging empirical veracity - relying on sensual confirmation for the validity of its concepts - actuality is what Kleist tries to reconcile with his desire for transcendence. We see this friction pushed to an apex of escalation, error and death in his works. If Kleist's 'crisis' was indeed about this friction, what are we to take from a Kleistian barred, or at least, problematic transcendence when reading his works?

Keywords: Kleist, Kant, actuality, transcendence, crisis

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Arbeit zielt darauf ab, das problematische Konzept des Tatsächlichen herauszuarbeiten, welches, so meine These, den Werken Heinrich von Kleists zugrunde liegt. Dabei argumentiere ich, dass Kleist die tatsächliche Welt als ein inhärentes Problem in der kritischen Philosophie von Immanuel Kant identifiziert, aber anstatt von der kantischen Philosophie überrumpelt zu werden, wie Kleist in seiner "Krise" von 1801 behauptet, bringt er dieses Problem in sein Verständnis (oder Missverständnis) von Kant ein. Kleist versucht die tatsächliche Welt als Kriterium der empirischen Wahrhaftigkeit, die sich auf die sinnliche Bestätigung der Gültigkeit ihrer Begriffe stützt, mit seinem Wunsch nach Transzendenz zu versöhnen. Wir sehen diesen Versuch in seinen Werken bis zur Eskalation, zum Irrtum und zum Tod getrieben. Wenn es bei Kleists "Krise" tatsächlich darum geht, was sollen wir dann bei der Lektüre seiner Werke von einer Kleistschen verschlossenen oder zumindest problematischen Transzendenz halten?

Stichworte: Kleist, Kant, Wirklichkeit, Transzendenz, Krise

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*It seems that I shall become another of the many victims of folly whom Kantian philosophy has on its conscience... I cannot wrest myself from its chains. The idea that we can know nothing, nothing at all, about truth in this life... has upset me in the very sanctity of my soul. My sole and highest aim has vanished. I no longer have one. Since then, I abhor books.*¹

Heinrich von Kleist

There is much in Kleistian scholarship that is agreed upon – the capricious temperament of the man himself, a world seemingly set against the protagonist in which eruptions of contingency thwart them at every turn, but perhaps most infamous of all: the adverse effect of the *Kantische Philosophie* on the twenty-four-year-old Kleist, which appears to have precipitated a crisis – the ‘Kant Crisis’ of 1801. The reason for the greater infamy of Kleist’s crisis presumably stems from the fact that ten years later (1811), at 4pm on November 21st on the bank of the Wannsee river, he shot himself immediately after shooting the terminally ill Henriette Vogel in a joint suicide pact. This period (1801-1811) contains ostensibly the entirety of Kleist’s literary career and, whilst short temporally, offers a surfeit of idiosyncratic works that hold clues as to what Kleist took from Kant. The temptation is to ask, ‘what caused the Kant crisis?’ But there isn’t a particular citation, or a specific sentence in a particular work we can seek to answer this. Rather, a more fruitful question might be: taking Kleist at his word – that Kant had induced him into throes of despair and uncertainty – what problem does the spectre of Kant in Kleist’s writings bring out into the open?

Section one will be centred around examining the credibility of Kleist’s claim, tracing his reaction in his letters to his fiancé Wilhelmine von Zenge and his cousin Marie von Kleist and cross examining them against what Kant himself writes. Why – even though the element of ‘critique’ in Kant’s *First Critique* is offered precisely in the capacity of finding the boundaries of reason for its more productive use – does Kleist read Kant’s prescriptive, proper use of reason as agitating to a deadly degree? It is between Kleist’s eisegesis of Kant and Kant himself that we will address that which appears to grow in volume the more we read each thinker through one another; a problem inherent in actualising transcendent thought. This unspoken but apparent preoccupation with the mode of the actual driving Kleist will be the hinge of this entire work and towards the end of this section we will define more

¹ Heinrich von Kleist, Berlin, March 23, 1801, to Ulrike von Kleist. Philip B. Miller, ed., *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist* (New York: E.P Dutton, 1982), 97. All images by author, many thanks to Howard Caygill, Peter Osborne, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

clearly what we mean by actuality, through a Kantian lens to ground that which follows.

In section two, the task begins of taking this strand of actuality and following it through two of Kleist's works, chosen for their different formal deployment in problematising actuality. The first will be *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, a story in which we see plotline acrobatics pulling the mode of the actual into myriad forms before a catastrophic missed transcendence. In staging situations where characters are tested beyond reasonable means, Kleist shows the problem of characters stuck in the actual aspiring for the transcendent and the problems this causes – the world that just won't play along, the God that doesn't offer redemption, the love that doesn't save anyone. This tale demonstrates Kleist presenting his characters with a slippery actuality which dupes them, perhaps like it did him. Section three will explore the tragic play, *Penthesilea*. Here one can see how Kleist uses the stage to drive the escalation of actuality to gory heights, utilising *teichoscopia* to full effect. If the effect of this escalation is rendered teichoscopically, what drives this escalation? *Penthesilea* shows us how Kleist destabilises the apparent safety of Kant's actual, which he presents in the form of a battleground, it is a symphony of errors in concert with one another, is the grisly outcome avoidable for us all if we can just reason more effectively?

1. A Crisis of Actuality

First I climbed the hill, and saw the two strangers seated in a shallow trench that was to be found there, the lady fallen backwards and facing upwards, the man however with his lower body crouching somewhat in the trench and fallen forward on the edge, to the right hip of the lady. His hands rested on his knees and a small pistol at his feet, at the bottom of the trench. A large pistol was lying at the edge of the trench, and a third small pistol was on the table around eight paces from the corpses ... I pulled up the male into a straight position so he would not become stiff in that position and difficult to bury.

Court Officer Felgentrev²

a) Kant the Accused

Whilst it's fair to say Kleist didn't receive Kantianism well, there are varying readings of what it was *about* Kant's work that troubled him so.³ There isn't

² From the official report of the court officer Felgentrev, justice in Heinersdorf, November 22 and December 2, 1811, and an eyewitness account. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 208.

³ Hinrich C. Seeba comments on the trial format often used by Kleist – “In Kleist's dramatic court of truth, it seems, the cognitive power of metaphorical language is constantly being tested. Its most powerful structure is, of course, the dramatic trial, a truth-finding interrogation ...” in “The Eye of the Beholder: Kleist's Visual Poetics of Knowledge,” *A*

even agreement on the work that Kleist had read; most assume that Kant's apparent weapon of choice was his first *Critique*, yet you'll find murmurings concerning the third.⁴ Further, there are those who think the 'crisis' was decidedly *post*-Kantian, pointing the finger squarely at Fichte⁵ or even *pre*-Kantian.⁶ Yet it is Kleist himself who incriminates the epistemological heir to Copernicus' revolution,⁷ calling himself another one of the "victims of folly of which the Kantian philosophy already has so many on its conscience."⁸ It is important that we assess the credibility of this statement if we are to understand Kleist. It could (and indeed will) be argued that Kleist isn't being entirely honest with himself, and, if this is the case, we're led to ask what Kleist's misreading of Kant yields.

Kleist seems to paint Kant as the great destroyer, yet Kant's defence might be that he was clearly concerned with pulling the burgeoning of man's reason back from unruliness, by assigning to it limits for its proper use.⁹ Kant

Companion to The Works of Heinrich von Kleist, ed. Bernd Fischer (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2003), 112. Even if Kleist overlooked the *spirit* of the first *Critique*, one could propose, quite convincingly that he borrowed some aspects of the *format*. Proving this point is not the purpose of this piece but, it does show the rhetoric of *opposition* Kleist took from Kant. Claudia Brodsky even goes as far as to describe Kleist as "Kant's literary *Doppelgänger*" (even if it is more in the spirit of the 'problem of representation' that the two share). C. Brodsky, *The Linguistic Condition: Kant's Critique of Judgment and the Poetics of Action* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 194.

⁴ "(The) ... *Kantkrise* in 1801 was famously prompted by a misreading of the third critique that led Kleist to despair of ever being certain of anything in the world." Elwood Wiggins, "Kleist's Four Causes: Narration and Etiology in *Das Erdbeben in Chili*" *MLN* 130/3 (2015): 605. Wiggins seems to address James Phillips' apparent leanings towards the third *Critique* in *The Equivocation of Reason: Kleist Reading Kant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). I, however read James Phillips as exploring a Kleistian reading of Kantianism through *varying* works of Kant. See also Bernhard Greiner's "The Performative Turn of the Beautiful: "Free Play" of Language and the "Unspeakable Person"" in *A Companion to The Works of Heinrich von Kleist*, 136.

⁵ See Ernst Cassirer, *Heinrich von Kleist und die Kantische Philosophie in Idee und Gestalt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971). Also, D.F.S Scott – "Kleist's crisis would seem to owe much more to the pessimistic transcendentalism expressed in Fichte's *Sonnenklarer Bericht* than to the more optimistic ideas of Kant's *Kritiken*." "Heinrich von Kleist's Kant Crisis," *The Modern Language Review* 42/4 (1947): 483.

⁶ Humean, even - see Tim Mehigan's "Betwixt a false reason and none at all?: Kleist, Hume, Kant, and the "Thing in Itself", in *Heinrich von Kleist: Writing after Kant* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2011), 165-188.

⁷ Even a Kant who was Kleistian! See Carol Jacobs, "The Style of Kleist," *Diacritics* 9/4 (1979): 55.

⁸ Heinrich von Kleist, Letter of March 23, 1801 to Ulrike von Kleist (UvK), P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 97.

⁹ To prevent reason "fall[ing] into obscurity and contradictions" Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A viii. Indeed, in the introduction to Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood's edition

says in the A preface of the first *Critique* that “the duty of philosophy was to abolish the semblance arising from misinterpretation” and again from the A preface – “I flatter myself that... I have succeeded in removing all those errors that have so far put reason into dissension with itself in its nonexperiential use.”¹⁰ Here we see that the transgression into the realms of the ‘nonexperiential’ is what leads to these ‘semblances’ putting reason into ‘dissension with itself.’ Kant is drawing as out-of-bounds the use of man’s reason without its empirical material of experience. Kant foresaw the necessity of the casualties of his project however and yet believed in pulling reason back to safety despite this, “even if many prized and beloved delusions have to be destroyed in the process.”¹¹ Kleist clearly falls into this category of those whose ‘delusions’ had to be shattered for the greater good of saving man’s reason.

Even though the jury is still out on the exact source of crisis within the critical philosophy, discussion invariably gravitates around the consequences of the noumenal / phenomenal split which apparently enlightens Kleist to the horrifying prospect that “truth is nowhere to be known here on earth.”¹² Kant ostensibly demonstrates that we can’t know the thing-in-itself, only the world of appearances, reducing experiential material into ‘appearances’ partially generated by the pure intuitions of spatio-temporality. Pushing away the ‘truth’ of the ‘thing-in-itself’ out, over the horizon of the thinkable / perceptible limit *could* be seen as a devastating blow, but again the thing-in-itself as the hinge of Kant’s project in the first *Critique* is 1. Produced in the interest of redemption, but also, 2. Even seen as grounds of subjective *empowerment* for the likes of Fichte and Hegel whose idealism is centred on this splitting as connoting a sort of *liberation* in thinking which radically amplifies the role of subjectivity in post-Kantian thought.

b) The World Through Green Glasses

As an example of Kant’s redemptive attempts, we could use the first section of the antinomy of pure reason, ‘The System of Cosmological Ideas’. In this section of the transcendental dialectic, the problem is explicated as follows: The series of conditions leading to the conditioned object we apprehend (always under the concept that all conditions must have a condition) – all of those conditions must be present in the object apprehended all the way back

of the *Critique of Pure Reason* they tell us that “Kant ... felt he had to *rein in* the pretensions of traditional metaphysics” (emphasis by author), *ibid.* 2

¹⁰ *Ibid.* A xii.

¹¹ *Ibid.* A xiii.

¹² March 22, 1801, to Wilhemine von Zenge (WvZ). P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 95.

along the chain to the *unconditioned*,¹³ and yet, we have no possible experience of a first or, *unconditioned* cause for these conditions, a *causa sui*. Kant's solution is to tell us that the unconditioned – the cause of itself – must be strictly *noumenal* and all the resulting conditions from it *phenomenal*.¹⁴ Kant imposes a limit, a boundary to keep that which can't be experientially reconciled out of play so that phenomenal data still adds up – the understanding and its categories are appeased by this move, in their strict service to providing the transcendental conditions for experience, the series of conditions can still stand if we posit the *causa sui* as noumenal, that is, outside of the time designation necessary to determine an object of experience.¹⁵

This salvages reason's attempts at unity but also "leaves room for faith"¹⁶ in that there can still be a first cause, only outside of possible perception. Fichtean idealism, for example, would take this even further and tell us that all of the empirical consequences, all that is *phenomenal* is purely the self-affecting potential of the absolute I, which one could reasonably argue is more terrifying in terms of object-loss than a cognitive edifice which partially constructs the world but still completely relies on 'given' empirical material for verification.¹⁷ Kant's transcendental philosophy actually aims to salvage the reason Kleist seems to hold so dear (providing a sort of instruction manual for its proper use) whilst also maintaining the importance of the empirical realm.

Kleist (potentially, with a little help from Karl Leonhard Reinhold)¹⁸ –

If everyone saw the world through green glasses, they would be forced to judge that everything they saw was green, and could never be sure

¹³ See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B436

¹⁴ The phenomenal here as 'appearance' – "If I am dealing with appearances, which as mere representations are not given at all if I do not achieve some acquaintance with them ... then I cannot say with the same meaning that if the conditioned is given, then all the conditions (as appearances) for it are also given; and hence I can by no means infer the absolute totality of the series of these conditions." Ibid, B527/A499

¹⁵ "Accordingly, the antinomy of pure reason in its cosmological ideas is removed by showing that it is merely dialectical and a conflict due to an illusion arising from the fact that one has applied the idea of absolute totality, which is valid only as a condition of *things in themselves*, to *appearances* that exist only in representation ..." Ibid, A506/B534 (emphasis by author). That is, things in themselves as noumena and appearances as phenomena.

¹⁶ "Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith ..." Ibid, B xxx.

¹⁷ See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man* (Dumfries: Anodos Books, 2019), 40.

¹⁸ "For it was Reinhold from whom Kleist may have borrowed his famous metaphor of the 'green glasses' that literally taint the perception of reality." H.C. Seeba, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 107.

whether their eyes saw things as they really are, or did not add something of their own to what they saw. And so it is with our intellect.¹⁹

Here we see Kleist apparently lamenting the uncertainty of the thing-in-itself, that the only ‘thing’ available is an adulterated ‘thing’. James Phillips suggests that “in his fixation on the thing-in-itself, Kleist seems not to notice that Kant has changed the rules of the game.”²⁰ This would account for the oversight of the redemptive aspect in Kant’s critical philosophy, but it still feels too weighted on the importance of the *noumenal*. Kleist’s concern in this letter articulates a suspicion of the *transcendental* in that one wouldn’t know if it erred, a wistfulness of the loss of the *transcendent* truth of a *noumenal* technicolour world *sans* green glasses. Put simply, the transcendental not as the grounds for experience, but viewed as interference into experience, which puts the prospect of an absolute world of truth into jeopardy.²¹

Truth is of course for Kant, the adherence of the conceptual framework of an object to its empirical counterpart. Kleist is positing an *absolute truth* outside of our “acquisition here”, throwing it over the horizon and lamenting its loss. John Geary suggests that Kleist’s “horror has less to do with Kant... than it does with Kleist and his sense of a world almost bent on destroying whatever man attempts to build.”²² A spectacular defeatism lying in wait to latch itself onto whatever philosophical system would dismantle his ideals completely and justify how the world actually appears to him. What is this world that undoes “whatever man attempts to build”? For Kleist, the transcendent realm of absolute truth is barred, and all that we see is subjectively contaminated.²³

c) The Drama of the Actual

Rather than describe this merely as an issue of ‘world’ (Geary) or apparent pessimism (Zweig), it is my conviction that the investigation of Kleist’s crisis might be made more fruitful through a discussion of modality, and as I’ve stated, particularly the mode of the *actuality*. How should we define actuality? In Kant’s first *Critique*, he outlines three empirical modalities in the

¹⁹ March 22, 1801, to WvZ. P.B Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 95.

²⁰ J. Phillips, *The Equivocation of Reason*, X.

²¹ Note on terminology - The transcendental can be read as ‘grounds of possibility’ in the Kantian sense; the *a priori*. The transcendent as that which oversteps the boundaries of actuality.

²² J. Geary, *Heinrich von Kleist: A Study in Tragedy and Anxiety* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 16.

²³ Stefan Zweig promotes a similar suspicion – “It is as if in some peculiar way, Kleist *wished* to find in Kant the complete negation of all his hopes and beliefs ...” Zweig, *The Struggle with the Daemon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche* (London: Pushkin Press, 2012), 7.

Postulates of Empirical Thinking, which Kant is careful to highlight, do not add anything to the object of experience, but “express only the relation to the faculty of cognition.”²⁴ Despite this, they can still help us organise types of modality in experience –

1. *Whatever agrees with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuition and concepts) is possible.*
2. *That which is connected with the material conditions of experience (of sensation) is actual.*
3. *That whose connection with the actual is determined in accordance with general conditions of experience is (exists) necessarily.*²⁵

Here we see that the *possible* connotes an experientially non-contradictory capacity to arise, even if it can't be proven to exist, the possible doesn't defy the rules of experience (intuition and concept) for it to be so.²⁶ To be however, connected with the 'material' conditions of experience is to be regarded as *actual*, to “obey the rules of relating appearances in terms of the permanence of substance, the nexus of cause and effect, and reciprocal action.”²⁷ In conforming to the intuitive and conceptual rigours underlying experience and spatio-temporal determination, the actual is closely tied with sensibility.²⁸ *Necessity* meets the conditions of the first two absolutely and without fail and cannot be otherwise. It is important that the cognitive edifice be capable of making such distinctions for us to be able to discern what *could be*, *is* and *must be*. Kant in the Third *Critique* tells us that this is particularly so with possibility and actuality, that without the receptivity of the sensibility, the concepts and categories of the understanding would fall into disarray and

²⁴ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A219.

²⁵ Ibid. B266. For further discussion of the role of modality in ensuring against a mismatch between the concepts of the understanding and sensibility in judgements, see Jessica Leech, *Making Modal Distinctions: Kant on the Possible, the Actual and the Intuitive Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

²⁶ Another distinction that Kant makes is that of logical possibility and real possibility. The former is related to the *a priori* concept containing no contradictions, that a thing theoretically could be possible. The latter, real possibility is however concerned with *empirical* possibility and therefore, the possibility of being an object of experience, so possibility here in this context is referring to real possibility and not logical possibility.

²⁷ H. Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 325

²⁸ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, in Kant's copy of the first edition after A218 – “That which is determined in time [is actual].” (E, XC, p.36; 23:32) Also – “That which is determined in time and space is actual...” (E, XCII, p.36;23:32)'. This isn't to say that everything actual must be verified first-hand however - I've never visited Kleist's grave, but my concept of it still stands in all its validity because empirical evidence would support that the grave being there is indeed the case.

muddle, “that is, if our understanding were intuitive, it would have no objects except what is actual.”²⁹ In short, anything we thought, would unquestionably exist, would have spatio-temporal coordinates without needed verification or ‘help’ from our sensibility.³⁰

Despite Kleist’s appeals to reason for an absolute truth “within this life”, it seems he was also acquainted with the *actuality* of life and, whilst I’d hesitate to posit a *causal* relationship, some of Kleist’s backstory would certainly suggest a familiarity with the less-than transcendent aspects of reality, an acquaintance certainly pre-dating the Kant Crisis of 1801.³¹ Indeed, Paul Hamilton in “Managing Kant Crises” makes the suspicious observation that “whether or not he read Kant in detail and with comprehension, the idea of being so disturbed by the philosopher was clearly very important to him.”³² If Kleist knew his way around Kantian philosophy before the 1801 crisis,³³ if he was “already leaning on the door” of this crisis³⁴ and if Kleist was even already plagued by a “daemon”³⁵, it would therefore appear difficult to arrive at the conclusion of Kleist being a passive victim of

²⁹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 272 (5: 402).

³⁰ “... for everything is actual that stands in one context with a perception in accordance with the laws of the empirical progression (the series of conditions in appearance).’ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A493. The actual is always *synthetic* and in concert with sensibility.

³¹ 1788 - 18th June. Father dies. Kleist is 11. (See David Luke and Nigel Reeves in *Heinrich von Kleist, Das Erdbeben in Chili in The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*. Trans. by David Luke and Nigel Reeves. [London: Penguin Books, 2004], 8). 1793 - 3rd February. Mother dies. Kleist is 16. (See P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 293). 1793 - March. Apparent robber attempts to hijack the carriage in which Kleist is travelling, Kleist describes the incident in his letter to his aunt. (See P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 15). 1800 - August to October. Makes a trip to Würzburg in connection with apparent sexual disorder. Kleist is 33, the purpose of the trip is hard to prove and is subject to debate. Geary describes the trip as mysterious (*Heinrich von Kleist: A Study in Tragedy and Anxiety*, p. xii) whilst Zweig gives a colourful account of Kleist’s apparent sexual disfunction (see S. Zweig, *The Struggle with the Daemon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche*, 166-168). Further, to add insult to injury, Kleist suffered a slight stammer. (Ibid.158)

³² P. Hamilton, “Managing Kant Crises”, *SPRACHKUNST – Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft* 2 (2018): 11, http://dx.doi.org/10.1553/spk49_2s11.

³³ Cassirer reminds us that by 1801 Kleist had “not merely glanced at Kant’s doctrine” but had even “already given it a special place in his ‘Life-plan.’” From the lecture *Heinrich von Kleist und die Kantische Philosophie* given in the Berlin department of the Kant Society on November 15, 1918. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/31276/pg31276-images.html>. (Many thanks to Howard Caygill for translating).

³⁴ “The *Critique of Pure Reason* did not, as Kleist seems to suggest, break down a door behind which he was innocently standing, rather it opened a door against which he was heavily leaning.” J. Geary, *Heinrich von Kleist: A Study in Tragedy and Anxiety*, 8.

³⁵ “But Kleist could not outrun the daemon, he failed to escape the hunter by burying him beneath tomes and pandects ...” S. Zweig, *The Struggle with the Daemon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche*, 181.

the *Kantische Philosophie*. Rather, Kleist found in Kant an opportunity to collapse with legitimate grounds, Kant was posited as the grounds of possibility for a Kleistian melodrama of breakdown, one that gave voice to the often vexing and frustrating dealings with the actual world completely incongruent with the lofty promises of enlightenment reason.³⁶

Kleist didn't really need transcendental philosophy to point out a disparity between the two realms he seemed to vacillate between, a position of grim actuality and transcendent fancy driven by the promises of reason. Even in a letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge in 1800 (the year before the 'crisis') where Kleist extols his pursuit of knowledge towards the absolute, he seems to be grasping at the heavens to bring it down within the liveability of an *actual* home, an *actual* life – “We must not confine ourselves to mere dreaming only. It is a reality when I imagine the amiable valley that will one day enclose our cottage, and *me* and *you* and my pursuit of *knowledge* in this cottage, and nothing else... I feel that nothing can make me happy except the fulfilment of this desire... But Reason must have a voice in it as well.”³⁷ A sense, then, already of disparity in the absolute knowledge that requires ‘pursuit’, a sense of trying to bridge together two incongruent worlds. Unfortunately, the voice of reason imagined as the bridge between these worlds (as Kant showed) is of roughshod and undependable construction, but Kant *neither created the gulf nor torched the bridge*, the gulf Kleist observes and *lives*, clearly predates the ‘crisis’ of 1801.

³⁶ P.B Miller helps us situate this incongruity – “Kleist’s generation already felt the more worldly failures of the Enlightenment program. If religion was mere superstition, as the Enlightenment had tended to think, then its own rationalistic optimism now seemed equally baseless. The post – Revolutionary turmoil and Terror in ‘enlightened’ France, and the prospect of a war in Europe on a scale unknown for more than a century, hardly seemed to Kleist’s generation evidence of mankind’s progress toward perfection.” P.B Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 4. Compare this to the pre-critical Kant (to keep with our ‘accused’) in 1784 – “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.” In this essay, Kant famously aligns enlightenment with freedom, specifically a greater civic freedom “the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.” Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* <https://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Online/texts/318/Kant,%20Enlightenment.pdf>

In this light, there almost seems a certain portentous flavour to Kant’s later reservations concerning reason in his A preface of the *Critique* in 1781 where he describes metaphysics as “a battlefield.” I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A viii.

³⁷ November 13, 1800, to WvZ. P.B Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 72.

2. Paradise Through the Wrong Door in *Das Erdbeben in Chili*

The male had on a brown cloth frock coat, a white batiste muslin vest, gray cloth trousers, soft boots with rounded toes, his face bloodstained around the mouth, but only slightly.

Court Officer Felgentrev³⁸

a) Modulations in the Actual

As we have seen, Kant for Kleist becomes the apotheosis of an incongruity of idealised striving towards transcendence against a disappointingly finite actuality. The task now begins of mapping the modulations of this tale as they relate to the mode of actuality (that is the modulations within a mode). We see these modulations play out spectacularly in Kleist's tale *Das Erdbeben in Chili* (1806) which is based on the actual earthquake in Santiago, Chile in 1647 but still contains the sense of thwarting allegory we can expect from Kleist. The metaphor of the mirror will be introduced here, as an agent of distortion, not just reflection. This evocation of reflection / distortion is imported from Kleist's metaphor of the concave mirror in *Über das Marionettentheater* (1810) – “just as two intersecting lines, converging on one side of a point, reappear on the other after their passage through infinity ... just as our image, as we approach a concave mirror, vanishes to infinity only to reappear before our very eyes.”³⁹ Keeping the metaphor of the concave mirror as a backdrop, an explication of the plot will unfold simultaneously with analysis.⁴⁰



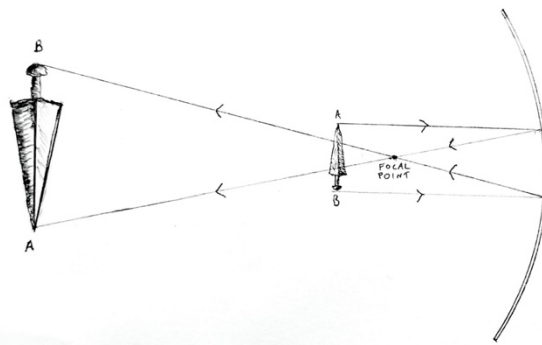
The tale begins with both main characters, Jerónimo and Josefa awaiting their execution for a tryst in the garden of a convent. Their

³⁸ From the official report of the court officer Felgentrev, justice in Heinersdorf, November 22 and December 2, 1811, and an eyewitness account. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 208.

³⁹ H.v. Kleist, “Über Das Marionettentheatre”. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 216.

⁴⁰ In Walter Benjamin's essay “Goethe's *Elective Affinities*”, he makes the distinction between the ‘truth content’ of a work, which criticism aims to uncover and the ‘material content’ which commentary unfolds: “the truth content always remains ... hidden as the material content comes to the fore.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 297. The material content can have many forms (style, language used, technique etc.) which of course have particular historical determinability, the truth content is rather the immortal content of the work that not even the one who produces the work may have access to whilst utilising the material content. In the criticism of a text, we must go through the material content in seeking the truth content, and in this respect, I will try to honour the interplay of the two.

indiscretion becomes apparent with the birth pangs of their child, Filipe on the day of Corpus Christi, on the steps into the cathedral. “Suddenly, with a crash as if the very firmament had shattered, the greater part of the city collapsed, burying every



living thing beneath its ruins.”⁴¹ And with this, the lovers are freed from their condemnation. The purely contingent erupts here not *just* in the spirit of reminding us of man’s terror at being reduced to “a plaything of Chance, a puppet on the string of fate...”⁴² but also as the grounds for a *Kleistian flip*, a catalyst for abrupt, *seismic* change. The irrationality of the earthquake here assumes the role of the vanishing point in the concave mirror metaphor, intervening to move the plot to the inverted place which follows in which the characters must attempt a reasoning of this lack of reckoning and of the caprices of actuality, leaving them trying to account for such a profound *inversion* of fortune.⁴³

After being spat out by the vanishing point, the two lovers and their son Felipe (whom Josefa recovers whilst also escaping her condemnation via the earthquake) reconvene outside the city in the surrounding woodlands. The reader will notice at this point in the tale the sensorially rich descriptions of these woodlands – “the loveliest of nights had fallen, wonderfully mild and

⁴¹ H.v. Kleist, “Das Erdbeben in Chili”, *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, Trans. by David Luke and Nigel Reeves (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 52.

⁴² Letter of May 1799 to UvK. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 28. In which Heinrich details how unimaginable it is for him to live a life girded by fate.

⁴³ We are reminded of Kant’s three essays on earthquakes, their causes and use. *On the Causes of Earthquakes on the Occasion of the Calamity that befell the Western Countries of Europe Towards the End of Last Year* (1756), *History and Natural Description of the Most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake That Struck a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year 1755* (1756), and *Magister Immanuel Kant’s Continued Observations on the Earthquakes that have been Experienced for some Time* (1756). Kant, hypothesising around the causes for such disasters is appealing to reason instead of succumbing to the theological histrionics the wake of such disasters. Discussions of this telluric activity (in Kant inadvertently but in Kleist overtly) force us to question whether reason can promise security and consistency against the very actual threat of an eruption of contingency. Kant’s efforts to rally man’s ingenuity only show us the scale of the danger, a danger within the actual which Kleist’s characters’ lives are redirected by, yet catastrophically overlook.

fragrant, silvery and still, a night such as only a poet might dream of.”⁴⁴ Is this still the world that Josefa and Jerónimo were condemned so harshly in? This world oversaturated with unremitting, saccharine loveliness that Kleist brings out over-intensifies this section in the direction of the transcendent. When Jerónimo, Josefa and their little Felipe come across another party of refugees from the earthquake – fearing the enduring judgement of these folks who Josefa remembers as “of excellent character”⁴⁵ – Josefa is plunged into embarrassment when Don Fernando asks Josefa if his child, Juan could feed at her breast due to the child’s mother, Elvira being injured. Josefa and Jeronimo are dumbstruck to find that they are welcomed by the party, and the affection from said party is only heightened once Josefa agrees to feed hungry little Juan. “Josefa felt as if she were in the land of the blessed”⁴⁶ and to Josefa, it seemed of this party that “their memories seemed not to reach back beyond the disaster.”⁴⁷ A calamity-induced *tabula rasa*.

Despite this loveliness, we must remember though, that the concave mirror is still producing the same object that is reflected.⁴⁸ Despite this modal ambiguity, the reader can be sure that the two lovers and their Filipe have not breached the walls of Eden.⁴⁹ This surety rests on the personification of a taint in the concave mirror, a taint betraying the illusory qualities of the mirror, preventing us from flying too far into the oneiric. Kleist is sure to place a character in this blessed land who shows a sort of knowing discomfort at the situation, Doña Isabel, Don Fernando’s sister-in-law, despite the general cordiality of the group “let her gaze rest pensively from time to time upon Josefa.”⁵⁰ This subtle but explosive puncturing of the utopic balloon is anchored in the realisation that as someone who was offered a place at Josefa’s execution and refused it, Doña Isabel *remembers* their transgression, here memory has survived the flip and denies us belief in the transcendence from their condemnation. Doña Isabel reminds us of the continuity of time inherent in determining actuality.⁵¹

⁴⁴ H.v. Kleist, “Das Erdbeben in Chili”, *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 59.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ That is, of course, after our brain has corrected the inverted image sent to it from the retina.

⁴⁹ Indeed, Elystan Griffiths tells us that “Kleist’s fictions generally demonstrate the idyll to be precarious, not only because of external pressures, but also because of the structures and mindsets that human beings carry with them into the idyll.” *The Shepherd, the Volk, and the Middle Class: Transformations of Pastoral in German-Language Writing, 1750-1850* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2020), 151.

⁵⁰ H.v. Kleist, “Das Erdbeben in Chili”, *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, 59.

⁵¹ See footnote 29.

Doña Isabel reminds us that for Kleist, there is no escaping the actual, the sense of ‘too good to be true’ here hovers constantly in uncertainty, the taint constantly drawing the eye away from the illusory promises of the mirror. Even though utopic aspirations for humankind seem to have become manifest after the disaster – “the human spirit itself seemed to unfold like the fairest of flowers.”⁵² – The uneasiness of Doña Isabel provides us with a boundary or limit to our optimism, the eye can’t focus entirely on the illusion of the mirror *or* the taint and we find ourselves stretched between the two poles of transcendence and actuality – the illusion within or *beyond* the mirror and the flawed surface.

b) Condemnation (A Reprise)

The end begins – the party hears of a mass being performed at the one church that survived the earthquake, the Dominican cathedral. This cathedral becomes the site of a spectacular crash back into Kleist’s un-inverted actuality of the world, an arena of conflict and disparity. Josefa leaps at the opportunity to attend the congregation and, “rising at once enthusiastically to her feet, declare(s) that she ha(s) never felt a stronger impulse to cast herself down before her Maker than at this very time.”⁵³ It is again, Doña Isabel who seems to be the one in the know⁵⁴ in terms of what the lofty decision Josefa makes means in actuality. Doña Isabel seems to have a strange “unhappy foreboding”⁵⁵ but her protests fail and the party (minus Doña Isabel, Don Pedro and Doña Elvira, the latter two of which are still too injured to make the journey) attend the cathedral.



Here we see the denouement Kleist has been building towards starting to take shape, a deferred and heavenly wrath reasserting itself against what seemed like God’s favour in the previous section, a friction like the tectonic plates grinding in the earthquake. The reality of the incongruency of lofty ideals and actuality come to the fore once more and a sacrifice must be made to atone for the slippage that afforded this apparent glimpse of paradise,

⁵² Ibid. 60.

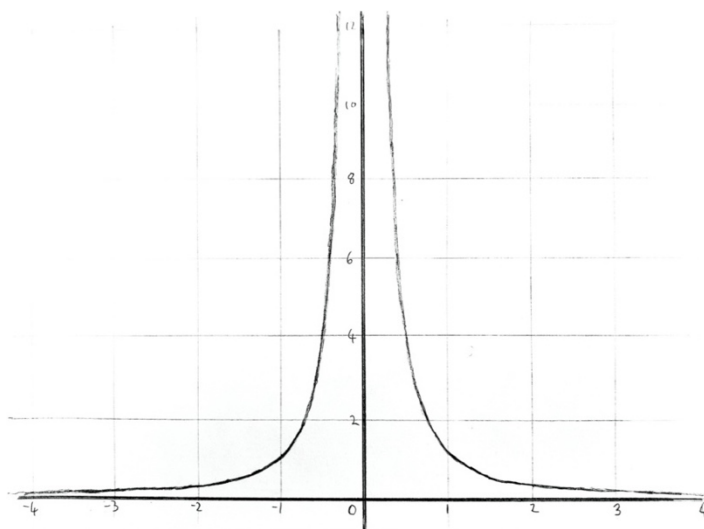
⁵³ Ibid. 61.

⁵⁴ For the role of women in Kleist as the ones in the know, see Leonard G. Schulze, “Alkamene’s Ominous ‘Ach!’ On Bastards, Beautiful Souls and the Spirit in Heinrich von Kleist”, *Studies in Romanticism* 19/2 (1980): 249-266.

⁵⁵ H.v. Kleist, “Das Erdbeben in Chili”, *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, 62.

however fleeting. Who would trigger this quasi-lapsarian fall for the lovers? Who else but a cleric, the mouthpiece of divine law who details the lovers' transgressions to the assembled mass of pious devotees. In an "earthquake of rhetoric"⁵⁶ this cleric precipitates what he and his congregation would call divine retribution but, in *actuality*, cajoles and rallies the crowd into bloodthirsty slaughter. Kleist makes sure that we're aware of this modal dualism in the escalating situation having Don Fernando call the increasingly furious mob "murderous villains."⁵⁷ The modulated actuality of paradise is revealed (by the very vessel of divine / transcendent word) as cohabiting the same modal dwelling as the nadir of human nature. Josefa, Jerónimo and Don Fernando's baby are slaughtered by the mob.

c) The Monstrous Actual



The monstrous actual where we end up is the actual we left, only escalated through a misreading of the concave mirror. Escalation can of course give the impression of sharing a similar trajectory to ascendance, an increase, a build-up, a movement *upwards*, towards the

heavens - ascendance until transcendence. Kleist shows us the true outcome of relentless escalation however, the result of this incredible but doomed *Salto Mortale* Josefa and Jerónimo make is a leap which always misses the absolute truth it aims for, merely *inflaming* everything in the vicinity. By once again hijacking *Das Marionettentheater*⁵⁸, we can introduce the geometric entity of

⁵⁶ E. Wiggins "Kleist's Four Causes: Narration and Etiology in 'Das Erdbeben in Chili'", 597.

⁵⁷ H.v. Kleist, "Das Erdbeben in Chili", *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, 65.

⁵⁸ This same effect of a missed grace is utilised by T. Mehigan to suggest a precursor to Nietzsche's posthumanism. Perhaps a more optimistic reading than mine. See T. Mehigan, "Posthumanist Thinking in the Work of Heinrich von Kleist", *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences after Kant*. Eds. Edgar Landgraf, Gabriel Trop, and Leif Weatherby (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 206.

the ‘asymptote’⁵⁹ to highlight this missed truth. In this essay Kleist describes the movement of the puppets in their relation to the puppeteer, against the precise relation – “of numbers to their logarithms or *asymptotes* to their *hyperbola*.”⁶⁰ Following this example we could read the asymptote (vertical line) in the diagram as a grace impossible in consciousness (or the paradisaical realm Kleist seems to describe earlier). Reaching towards the impossible, *escalating*, the two rationally derived hyperbola (curved lines in the diagram) try to close the gap, but the promise of consummation is deferred to *infinity*. That is, to make the leap to the asymptote, an *irrational* value or ‘surd’⁶¹ must be introduced, such an irrationally derived tectonic intervention cannot however, be maintained.

We see how in this model, Jerónimo and Josefa, with all their reasoning of the crisis always grasping for the asymptotic; of God’s plan, overlook the fact that their glimpse of paradise was pure contingency, an irrational emergence without divine rationale. Viewed without providence, the earthquake is a result of tectonics, the priest is just a man in robes, the initial survival of Josefa and Jerónimo luck, the church they die in just a building etc. In short, we get a glimpse of paradise but only through a wrong door – Kleist’s characters mistaking telluric activity and other survivors’ will to band together to survive in the actual as divine intervention in the modality of transcendent necessity, causing an *inflammation*, an escalation in the actual through misrecognition. Kleist seems to give us a cautionary tale in which we don’t reach the asymptote; but we erroneously reason that we have through the introduction of the surd to our hyperbola, of overlooking the taint marking the surface of the mirror. A deception which, as we saw in the first section, has clear export for Kleist whose ideals were just the play of light from the activities of reason he thought could promise salvation. Why didn’t we pay closer attention to Doña Isabel?

Yet of course, the tale hasn’t *quite* ended... Don Fernando and Doña Elvira adopt Josefa and Jerónimo’s child, Felipe. Kleist tells us that “when

⁵⁹ “An asymptote ...—most often a straight line—that another curve ‘doesn’t fall together with.’ In other words, the second curve ‘runs alongside’ its asymptote, getting closer to it but never hitting it.” Steven Schwartzman in *The Words of Mathematics - An Etymological Dictionary of Mathematical Terms used in English* (Washington, D.C.: The Mathematical Association of America, 1994), 30.

⁶⁰ H.v. Kleist, “Über Das Marionettentheatre”. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 212 (emphasis by author).

⁶¹ “Surd ...from Latin *surdus* ‘deaf.’ ... Why should expressions like those be called ‘deaf’? The explanation begins with the Greek word *alogos*, a compound of *a-* ‘not’ and *logos* ‘ratio, reason.’ (The Greek term was later literally translated into Latin, giving *irrational*.’ S. Schwartzman, *The Words of Mathematics - An Etymological Dictionary of Mathematical Terms used in English*, 214. Deaf to the voice of reason perhaps?

Don Fernando compared Felipe with Juan and the ways in which he had acquired the two of them, it almost seemed to him that he had reason to feel glad.”⁶² This is the final Kleistian flip of the tale, once again we’re moving in the direction of transcendent folly; that the death of Don Fernando’s *own child* could be healed, by a substitute child, just because that child was ‘acquired’ through sacrifice in a church; seems dangerously like providential thinking...

3. *Penthesilea* and the Theatre of War

The mouth was shut tightly, with both sets of teeth undamaged, and the tongue as well, and the jawbones could be separated only by the greatest effort with an iron lever, so that the gorge might be examined, wherein we could detect no further signs of the shot, but in the backmost part of the velum palatinum behind the uvula, a small roughness and depression of the bone could be felt with a finger where a one-third-ounce piece of lead had impacted.

Court Officer Felgentrev ⁶³

a) Thwarted Perspectives and Teichoscopy

In the previous section we saw the modulations of conflict within the actual and the deceptive shapes this can take. From the cathedral to the forest, the threat of violence always looms in the actual for Kleist. The actual is a battleground and *Penthesilea* captures this spectacularly.⁶⁴ The play of course hinges on the doomed love affair that blossoms between Penthesilea, the Queen of the Amazons and Achilles, the hero of the Greeks. Yet there is also a battleground within Penthesilea herself; in this respect she vacillates violently between flights of pure fancy and *gory* actuality based around her inner conflict between ‘Tanais’ Law’ (the ancient decree stating that she can only possess the love of a man whom she defeats in battle) and her actual, unearned love for Achilles. Before we address this friction fully however, we



⁶² H.v. Kleist, “Das Erdbeben in Chili” in *The Marquis of O- and Other Stories*, 67.

⁶³ From Kleist’s autopsy report. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 208.

⁶⁴ Kleist, as a retired Junker knew the idiosyncrasies of battle better than most. Kleist laments his “seven years lost to soldiery” in his letter of 1799 to UvK. Ibid. 27.

will initially examine the effect teichoscopy has on a reading of actuality in Kleist's *Penthesilea*, mapping out a route through the key scenes of the *over there* and onwards towards the climax of the play.

Patrice Pavis in her *Dictionary of the Theatre* describes Teichoscopy as “avoid[ing] having to show violent or unseemly actions on stage” but goes on to tell us that whilst sidestepping such offending issues, teichoscopy also “giv[es] the spectators the *illusion* that they are actually happening...”⁶⁵ It is a means for Kleist to suggest that the action is happening *right now*, whilst simultaneously being *over there*. The *over there* seems to be at odds with throwing us into the actuality of a play about war, but if we explore some of the key scenes utilising teichoscopy and bearing in mind the trajectory of the escalating love and violence between the two main characters, we see a play of conflicts with spectacular movement, that uses these spatio-temporal considerations to give a sense of mobility between the poles of the transcendent and actual, highlighting them more explicitly.

In act three we see a description of Achilles and his chariot attempting to evade Penthesilea –

*MYRMIDON: Oh, how he leans far out
Over their flying backs and urges them!
And they at the sound – immortal coursers! – they
Devour in thund’ring flight the fleeting ground.
Their throats’ hot vapour, streaming out behind,
Seems, by the god of life, to draw the car!
The stag before the hounds is not more swift!
Sight cannot penetrate the whirling wheels
Whose spokes all mingle in a solid disc.’*

...

*CAPTAIN: And does she gain?
A DOLOPIAN: She gains!
MYRMIDON: But not yet near!
DOLOPIAN: She gains! She gains! With ev’ry thund’ring hoofbeat
She swallows down some of the space
That still divides her from great Peleus’ son –
MYRMIDON: O all ye gods! Protecting deities!
Look! Now she is almost as large as he!*⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “From the Greek teichoskopia, seeing through the wall.” Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. The Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2016), 381.

⁶⁶ H.v. Kleist, “Penthesilea” in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 178 – 179.

In this act we ‘see’ Penthesilea in blistering chariot pursuit of the hero of the Greeks. Noticing the deific descriptions of Achilles a few lines earlier in which he seems to be described in metaphoric sun-like fashion and the above description of the inhuman manoeuvre in which he escapes, it is easy to fall into the transcendent reading of this demi-god warrior, further reinforced by him being literally introduced as *over there, beyond*.⁶⁷ Penthesilea not only closes in on Achilles but us too, “she swallows down some of the space.”⁶⁸ Penthesilea begins what will be the overarching movement of the play, of driving Achilles from his ideality into the disappointing actuality of humanity, indeed in the very next scene (four), our first instance of Achilles onstage shows him as irritable and injured. We could read this as similar to the flipping in *Das Erdbeben* but this instance is a little different – instead of a conflict of world and ideal, what we see here is a cleaving down the middle of an individual character and an actuality playing catch up following the scenes of transcendent battle. This first interaction of the two on the battlefield punctures the balloon of the Homeric Achilles of Greek mythology; we can see the nascency of a dual movement in just this first meeting: that the closer Penthesilea gets to Achilles the less ideal he becomes.⁶⁹

Here our messengers describe the second meeting of Penthesilea and Achilles upon the battlefield in scene seven, this time from the Amazon camp

—
FIRST GIRL (on the hill):
Yes there she is! The whole field now is clear.
FIRST PRIESTESS: Where can you see her?
GIRL: Leading all the host.
See how she dances forth to meet him, all
Flashing in golden armor, breathing war!
 ...

GIRLS (on the hill): Oh, see! Oh, now they meet!
Ye gods! Let not Earth shudder at the shock!
Now, even now, even as I speak, they crash
*Together like two hurtling stars in heav'n!*⁷⁰

⁶⁷ “Before Achilles enters the stage for the first time, his image is visually constructed out of its body parts as they become visible, one by one from the top down, when he comes up like the rising sun from behind a hill.” H.C. Seeba, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 117.

⁶⁸ H.v. Kleist, “Penthesilea” in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 179.

⁶⁹ Escalation / deflation. As the actual escalates around them, the two characters become drained of anything that would mark them as anything more than demonstrably human.

⁷⁰ H.v. Kleist, “Penthesilea” in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 199 -200.

This encounter describes the fateful instance where the two clash again, this time, however, they literally collide; Achilles' spear 'splitting' Penthesilea's breast. Such dramatic poetry of the *over there*. The girls on the hill conjuring metaphors of the cosmos to describe the clash of these two titans. Yet once again, after the following act wherein an officer describes the fall of Penthesilea in more detail, scene nine has Penthesilea enter 'supported by Prothoe and Meroe', and, in a 'feeble'⁷¹ voice ranting and raving about killing Achilles but also proclaiming her love for him. Again, Kleist gives us the teichoscopic rendering of the battle, just to have one of the belligerents appear, having closed the space of the *over there* to get to us, limping like a wounded bird and bereft of her senses. A victim of both the wound in her breast but also, the cleaving of her emotional unity, torn asunder by the warring *nomos* of Amazonian law and the *eros* of her fiery passions.

b) The Bleeding Actual

Achilles and Penthesilea's final clash on the battlefield occurs after Penthesilea learns that it was Achilles whose spear dropped her in the previous clash and not vice versa as Prothoe's subterfuge had led her to believe. Penthesilea is 'beside herself' and 'half mad' with shame and grief and, upon receiving a message that Achilles challenges her once more on the battlefield, enthusiastically re-enters the arena of conflict. Achilles thinks that she is so smitten with him that she won't harm him, that he can feign his defeat to Penthesilea and in this way, he can have her. His bloody error is relayed in the third teichoscopic account of a more fatal clash⁷² on the remote battlefield of the hinterland in scene twenty-two –

HIGH PRIESTESS: You maidens, who will bring me news?

SECOND PRIESTESS: Terpé! Quick! Tell us what you see from yonder hill?

AN AMAZON: (*who has mounted the hill, horror-struck*): You grim and ghastly gods of nether hell! Be witness to my words – Oh fearful spectacle!

HIGH PRIESTESS: How now! How now! Has she beheld Medusa?

PRIESTESS: What do you see? Speak! Speak!

AMAZON: Penthesilea –

Grovelling she couches by her grizzly hounds,

⁷¹ Ibid. 202.

⁷² This clash is interestingly characterised as more of a 'hunt' on the part of Penthesilea by Grazia Pulvirenti and Renata Gambino. See "Hounds, Horses and Elephants in Heinrich von Kleist's Drama Penthesilea", *Animals and Humans in German Literature, 1800 – 2000: Exploring the Great Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 7.

She whom a woman's womb did bear, and rends –
 His limbs she rends and mangles to shreds!
 HIGH PRIESTESS: Oh horror! Horror!

ALL: Deed unspeakable!

AMAZON: See where it comes, bleached o'er with death's own hue,
 The word that solves for us the gruesome riddle.

*(She descends from the hill.)*⁷³

Achilles is shot through the throat with Penthesilea's arrow. This instance, whilst still maintaining the teichoscopic splitting, functions slightly differently than the two previous; the remote as well as the intimate actual action depicted is base, unheroic both from Achilles, who "flees in horror,... flees, like a young roe"⁷⁴ and Penthesilea who chews on Achilles' shoulder like one of her dogs.⁷⁵ This time, when a shellshocked Penthesilea reappears on the stage in scene twenty-four along with Achilles' corpse which is covered by a red pall, we see only the escalated form of a horrible actuality of the two character's incompatible forms of love. These three encounters of Penthesilea and Achilles culminate in the actual consequences of their mistaken beliefs; for Penthesilea - believing that Achilles is a deity she can tame through Tanais' law, the concomitant fault of belief in a transcendent being and an absolute law and, for Achilles – believing in his *own* status as transcendent warrior, overestimating his ability to overcome Penthesilea's furious faith in absolute law. Indeed, in scene twenty-two, Kleist changes up the ongoing theme of the remote ideal and the intimate actual by *infecting* the remote ideal with the baseness of humanity, it bleeds into the ideal-far and dramatically spills onto the intimacy of the stage, as red as Achilles' pall.⁷⁶ In *Penthesilea* we see war as described by a poet versus war with all its leaking baggage, of very human errors.

⁷³ Ibid. 252.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 253.

⁷⁵ "Penthesilea proceeds to do that which even Homer's terrible Achilles was incapable: joining the mastiffs, she sinks her teeth into the rent flesh of Achilles." Linda Hoff-Purviance, "The Form of Kleist's Penthesilea and the Iliad", *The German Quarterly* 55/1 (1982): 43.

⁷⁶ We are reminded of Kant's advocacy for the proper determination between faculties in his *Inaugural Dissertation*, where he warns against the "*infection between sensuous and intellectual cognition*", I. Kant, *Kant's Inaugural Dissertation of 1770*, trans. by William J. Eckoff (New York: Columbia College, 1894), 75. Perhaps reminiscent of the way that, for Kleist, Kant's transcendental philosophy appeared to bleed into actuality, barring transcendent truth.



Seán Allan tells us that “Penthesilea’s predicament is largely brought about by her failure to distinguish between the real-life Achilles and the wish fulfilling image of him that exists in her imagination.”⁷⁷ Indeed, this misrecognition is the archetype of all of the errors within the play (and one we recognise from *Das Erdbeben*), whether it be this misrecognition of Achilles’ deific status by Penthesilea, of her taking Tanais’s Law as absolute or even Achilles himself believing in his own invincibility, his own *necessity*: the modal muddle reigns once more. The way however, Allan reads this as *Penthesilea* suggesting that if “human beings would renounce their fruitless quest for monolithic certainty and stop regarding their contingent man-made conventions as infallible truths” that human beings “would avoid many of the crippling and potentially catastrophic disappointments in life which they are repeatedly beset”⁷⁸ only touches on half of the problem. Penthesilea continues loving Achilles even after Achilles’ ideality becomes more and more transparent. The errors in *Penthesilea* are unavoidable in flawed creatures such as you and I and Kleist knew it. We fall in love with those who don’t reciprocate, we fall for lies, even ones we tell ourselves. This is the bind we see over and over in Kleist’s works and particularly in *Penthesilea*, to which Kleist ascribed personal importance.⁷⁹ What Kleist shows us is the error which all of his characters make, is an error inherent in the actuality of being human, of which reason is implicated.

⁷⁷ Séan Allan, *The Plays of Heinrich von Kleist: Ideals and illusions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 162.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 177. Allan (Ibid.45) does note that Kleist draws a distinction between the pursuit of ‘realisable’ ideals and non-realizable ‘transcendent’ ideals but how could one know with any certainty which were which when Kleist shows us that actuality is so *slippery*?

⁷⁹ Kleist to Marie von Kleist (his cousin), Dresden, Late Autumn, 1807 – “Indescribably moving, all that you write about *Penthesilea*. It is true, my deepest nature is there, and you have caught it like a seeress: all the filth and radiance of my soul together.” P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 175. It’s worth noting also that Kleist wrote *Penthesilea* in a French jail cell after being suspected of spying. Thwarted by ‘fate’ once more.

c) Escalation of Error: Love and Absolute War

In Carl von Clausewitz's seminal work *On War* he frequently conjures the division between theoretical or *ideal* war, something calculated in terms of logical considerations only and *actual* war, in which war is consistently beset by the thwarting proclivities of contingency and the unquantifiable aspects of humanity. In military strategy, one must keep in mind that "the art of war deals with living and with moral forces. ... it must always leave a margin for uncertainty."⁸⁰ In the real theatre of war, people can have myriad motivations and complexities which may interfere with the overarching strategy, not to mention that they make errors... This dichotomy between ideal and actual is clearly used by Clausewitz in the interest of guiding commanders to take issues of practical as well as theoretical import seriously in war, and to calculate probabilities for unintended outcomes.



When, however, Clausewitz says that "every fault and exaggeration of the theory is instantly exposed in war,"⁸¹ he could, to give one example, easily be describing Penthesilea's rote adherence to Tanais' Law, a 'fault' which doesn't account for the very *actual* likelihood of genuinely falling in love. Here Penthesilea's prophecy bequeathed by her mother (that she will crown Achilles with a garland) "proves literally true but actually false."⁸² Achilles certainly gets his garland.⁸³ Where does all this

escalation lead us? In scene twenty-four, the warrior, inflamed to apparent madness in her quest to satisfy both Tanais' Law and her own unbridled and very *human* passions, fully encounters the gravitas of her actions. Achilles is dead. She is forced to face this when presented



⁸⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27.

⁸¹ Ibid. 66.

⁸² J. Geary, *Heinrich von Kleist: A Study in Tragedy and Anxiety*, 15. That is *theoretically* true, *actually* false using Clausewitz's distinction.

⁸³ As Penthesilea observes in the final scene – "Ah, all these bleeding roses! Ah, this red wreath of gashes round his head." H.v. Kleist, "Penthesilea" in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 263. The transcendent object of desire is once again missed, leaving only the actuality of the bloody consequences.

with the marker of the utmost actuality⁸⁴ of the play's conflict, the dead body of Achilles. Not just dead but mutilated by her own hand / teeth. Penthesilea in her grief renounces Tanais's Law and produces a dagger within herself of *pure feeling* –

*PENTHESILEA: For now I will step down into my breast
As into a mine and there will dig a lump
Of cold ore, an emotion that will kill.
This ore I temper in the fires of woe
To hardest steel: then steep it through and through
In the hot, biting venom of remorse;
Carry it then to Hope's eternal anvil
And sharpen it and point it to a dagger;
Now to this dagger do I give my breast:
So!So!So!So! Once more! Now, it is good.*⁸⁵

Penthesilea is dead.

Later in *On War*, Clausewitz introduces the concept of 'absolute war.' Due to Clausewitz's shifting terminology during the process of writing it is often misinterpreted⁸⁶ – he seems to use 'absolute war' in terms of the highest possible point of theoretical escalation which informs (and thus applies to) actual war, absolute war is a *threat*. "Theory" he tells us, "has the duty to give priority to the absolute form of war and to make that form a general point of reference, so that he who wants to learn from theory becomes accustomed to

⁸⁴ I am thinking here of Martin Heidegger's 'ownmost' – "Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.*" Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Eastford CT: Martino Fine Books, 2019), 294. Death as the ever-present possibility of no further possibilities.

⁸⁵ H.v. Kleist, "Penthesilea" in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 275. Penthesilea's suicide seems (in its almost magical construction) to give an instance of the world which Kant warned us about in section one of this piece, that is, "if our understanding were intuitive, it would have no objects except what is actual." I.Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 5:402.

⁸⁶ In *Clausewitz's Categories of War* by Christopher Bassford, he admits to us that "many people (including myself) have assumed that ideal war is a synonym for absolute war. In Book 1, however, Clausewitz eliminated the ambiguity of 'absolute war' and set up a clear distinction between the pure abstraction of 'ideal war' on the one hand, driven to unachievable extremes outside the boundaries of time, space, and man's political nature, and war in practical reality on the other... ideal war is an exercise in pure logic, serving to demonstrate the dangers of rigid logic in the human social universe and forcing the discussion to return to the practical domain of politics... The dialectical opposite of 'ideal war' is 'real war,' which now returns to its literal meaning encompassing war as it actually occurs, in all of its variety." Christopher Bassford, "Clausewitz's Categories of War", (2002), <https://www.clausewitzstudies.org/bibl/Bassford-ClausewitzsCategoriesOfWar.pdf>

keeping that point in view constantly, to measuring all his hopes and fears by it.”⁸⁷ It is as Howard Caygill tells us, that for Clausewitz, “the real problem is managing the violence of the absolute, what he calls ‘absolute war’ or the enormous capacity for violence.”⁸⁸ War at its utmost is an ever-present threat in the actual that cannot be planned for or eradicated from the horizon, we can only hope for de-escalation. *Penthesilea* takes us to a point of such escalation that there is only error and death with no resolution: “a logic tending to mutual destruction”⁸⁹ in Caygill’s words.

These Clausewitzian warnings of the absolute bear a striking resemblance to what we know of Kant’s project. Indeed, it is exactly as Caygill reminds us, that “Kant warned against the consequences of moving from appearances to the world of absolutes such as God, the World and the Soul, while recognizing that it was in the nature of human reason to make this passage, and to suffer the consequences – error, oppression and even madness.”⁹⁰ Reason oversteps itself consistently and cannot always be trusted – Kant tells us of the dialectical vagaries of reason, that “they are sophistries ... of pure reason itself, and even the wisest of all human beings cannot get free of them; perhaps after much effort he may guard himself from error. But he can never be wholly rid of the illusion, which ceaselessly teases and mocks him.”⁹¹ As the faculty of restlessly ascending to the unconditioned, reason must be tempered and its voice vetted. It is *almost* as Allan said, that we must be wary of labelling manmade constructions as transcendent prescriptions, but this alone doesn’t protect us, the actual is a battlefield where illusions spring up constantly and chaos reigns, on which we can die at any moment or even fall for the enemy.

We must maintain a balance and keep watch over the actuality of our finite affairs, lest they get out of hand. *Penthesilea*, apparently hoping to obfuscate the grim facts, desperately tries to minimise her butchery – “it was a slip – believe me! – the wrong word.”⁹² This is not as outlandish as it first appears, the overlooking of actual escalation here is the point. In his essay *Über die Allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden*, Kleist ruminates on the way Mirabeau couldn’t have prepared his words to the King of France’s master of ceremonies but had to be in the actuality of the moment, subject

⁸⁷ C.v. Clausewitz, *On War*, 225.

⁸⁸ H. Caygill, “Thus Spoke Zapata”, (2012), 21.
https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp171_article1_caygill_alsosprachzapata.pdf

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B397.

⁹² H.v. Kleist, “Penthesilea” in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 266.

to all its minutiae for his famous words to appear to him. “Perhaps, after all, it was only the twitch of an upper lip, or an ambiguous fingering of a wrist frill, that precipitated the overthrow of the old order in France.”⁹³ Similarly, Penthesilea, in reducing her butchery to a slip of the tongue, conjures a long ramp of escalation with the horror of ‘absolute war’ at the zenith and something as easily overlooked as a ‘wrong word’ at the foot. But even more horrifying: Kleist shows us the universality of this risk for all rational beings, that his monstrous vision of the *actual* is the unavoidable risk of our reason which ceaselessly ascends towards the absolute.

4. Conclusion (Death on the Wannsee)

Here we return to where we started, the end; death, which seems to be the only outcome for transcendent folly for Kleist. We have seen the ‘Kant crisis’ which became an emblem of sorts, put into the service of an ongoing battle in Kleist, of attempting to actualise the transcendent, trying to live the absolute, which was a friction building before the apparent ‘crisis’. That Kleist shattered himself upon the dualistic Kantian phenomenal / noumenal split, only articulated the existing split within himself, a mistaken modal vacillation between the apparent necessity of absolutes and the contingent actuality he was forced to live. Here was a dialectic without resolution, the escalation towards absolute war within Kleist which, as we know, eventually hit the utmost of its potentiality. We must not read Kleist as a thinker whom Kant suddenly induced into crisis – as if the first *critique* were some demonic instrument of self-destruction – no, we must acknowledge that Kleist clearly came to it with this war already raging in his heart.

(*Thunder*)⁹⁴

What Kleist’s reading of Kant offers however is problematising just how safe the hard-won safety of the first *Critique* – which Kant secures for us through his guide to the proper use of reason – really is. Tim Mehigan tells us that “if Kant’s project was the insight that reason functions best when its limits are properly understood, Kleist’s was to point out the limits of these limits when applied to life situations.”⁹⁵ We can take this even further than the rhetoric of limits however – that even if an axiomatic and rigorously logical rendering

⁹³ H.v. Kleist, “Über die Allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden”. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*. 220.

⁹⁴ From stage directions in, H.v. Kleist, “Penthesilea” in *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 244.

⁹⁵ T. Mehigan, *Writing after Kant*, 183.

of the borders of reason's legitimacy stop us flying off into the absolute, the ground we depart from is not safe either. If Kant's project departs from the grounds of what already must be, what is 'given' (the realm of experience, the *actuality* of empirical data in synthesis with concepts), Kleist, whilst seemingly departing from the same place problematises this very given as precarious and forever ready to erupt into conflict or contingency.

Therefore, a Kantian vigilance to the spectres of error within reason is completely flawed for Kleist. Kant's attitude was that reason's dialectical shadow-play will keep coming forever – all that you can do is be watchful to catch yourself sliding into erroneous subreption. Even though we get a character like Doña Isabel in *Das Erdbeben* as a marker to help us find our way again, there's the sense that for Kleist, it wouldn't have mattered if they had indeed heeded her feeling of foreboding. That it would have been something else that got Josefa and Jerónimo even if it wasn't the church congregation. It's easy to see why Kleist's work often takes on the hue of a malevolent fate, because he pushes the odds so hard against his characters it seems like something more sinister than actuality. We can convincingly argue however that Kleist's works aren't about determinism as such, but rather (that which yields the same outcome), that his characters choose their own paths, use their reason to navigate a world not already predetermined, *but it doesn't matter in the slightest anyway*. Try as you might the actual is replete with errors because human beings are flawed and error prone.

Kleist's actual is permanently escalated because to him, neutrality is the ever-lost guiding truth. When God and grand narratives are revealed as absent, whatever remains will appear daemonic, will appear to destroy "whatever man tries to build" in Geary's words. What better medium for articulating this apparent thwarting tendency of the actual than storytelling and drama? The irony is of course that in doing so, Kleist was warning about the pursuit of the absolute through a medium favoured by his contemporaries for pursuing some sort of *aesthetic* or *poetic* romantic absolute.⁹⁶ He negates the transcendent of a supposedly transcendent medium through terminal

⁹⁶ Yet, the tableaux that Felgentrev found when discovering the bodies of Kleist and Vogel has been described by Karl Heinz Bohrer as "carefully planned and almost staged" - *Suddenness: On the Moment of the Aesthetic Appearance*. Trans. by Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 173. Similarly, by Hilda M. Brown as 'stage-managed' - "Ripe Moments and False Climaxes: Thematic and Dramatic Configurations of the Theme of Death in Kleist's Works" in *A Companion to The Works of Heinrich von Kleist*. Ed. Bernd Fischer. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2003), 210. This does suggest a final aesthetic act by Kleist, even if Brown notes that the very act of suicide "damaged his reputation, delayed the publication of his works, and stood in the way of an unbiased appreciation of his oeuvre for at least 100 years." Ibid. 211.

ascension and chronic modal inflammation. *Escalation*. We experience being escalated close enough to the absolute to singe our eyebrows, Kleist holds us there for as long as we can bear before unceremoniously dropping us, allowing earth's gravity to suck us back down onto *terra firma* with a 'thud'. We, like Kleist's characters are continually punished for falling for his poetics, the second we, for a moment think of transcendence... 'Thud.' The thud of the fall or the arrow piercing Achilles' windpipe? Again, either way the result is the same.

*(Loud Thunder)*⁹⁷

So, what can we do when the Kantian warning of staying within the safe confines of a properly utilised reason appear ostensibly no safer than sailing off into dialectical abstractions? The advice to not go seeking the transcendent in the actual is fine except that, as we've seen, our reason restlessly seeks it without our approval. As the very nature of reason itself, the *actuality* of conscious beings is characterised by the errors that emerge from *being conscious beings*. The advice Kleist gives Ulrike in his letter of 1800 which we saw earlier takes on new shading when read against the lesson of *Penthesilea* – "concentrate, then, on this limited span of time. Do not concern yourself with your purpose after death, for in so doing you may easily neglect your purpose in this world."⁹⁸ If you bring a conviction of loss to a view of the horizon, you will only sense what's disappeared over it, and, mourning this, focussed on the *over there*, only seek the vanishing point of the actual. Sailing off in pursuit of this point, the water is likely to get choppy and choppy. How do you get beyond the waves? You'd have to *row through infinity*.⁹⁹

*(Exeunt omnes)*¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ From stage directions in, H.v. Kleist, "Penthesilea", *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 245.

⁹⁸ September 15, 1800, to WvZ. P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 63.

⁹⁹ "... just as two intersecting lines, converging on one side of a point, reappear on the other after their passage through infinity... just as our image, as we approach a concave mirror, vanishes to infinity only to reappear before our very eyes." H.v. Kleist, "Über Das Marionettentheatre". P.B. Miller, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, 216.

¹⁰⁰ From stage directions in, H.v. Kleist, "Penthesilea", *Heinrich von Kleist: Plays*, 250.