06 2004

Staging the Political

Oliver Marchart

"Étudiants, l'Odéon est ouvert."

On May 15, 1968, a crowd of students and artists stormed the Parisian Theatre Odéon. It was 11 pm and the audience of that night's performance had just left the theatre. The students poured into the building, informing the director Jean-Louis Barrault, a theatre legend and friend of Artaud's, that from now on his institution was occupied as it represented an elitist and bourgeois idea of culture and would have to be turned into a centre of revolution. For one month, the Odéon theatre would become a focus for the students' revolt. There was no theatrical action anymore, not even alternative forms of theatre, as the theatre was entirely transformed into a place for *political* action. Political action in form of speech: the Odéon turned into a forum, an agora. It became a public space in which the fourth wall between "actors" and "spectators" was torn down. Instead, everybody was allowed to speak freely. "Non-stop", as Barrault noted, "7 x 24 = 168 hours a week".[1] And in a communiqué issued by the *Comité d'action révolutionnaire*, a sort of central committee of the squatters, it was pronounced that: " L'action n'est pas dirigée contre une personne ni un répertoire, mais contre une culture bourgeoise et sa représentation théâtrale. L'Odéon cesse pour une durée illimitée d'être un théâtre. Il devient un lieu de rencontre entre ouvriers. Une permanence révolutionnaire, un lieu de meeting

ininterrompu.'[2] For an indefinite time-span the theatre - which ceased being a theatre - was supposed to become an undisturbed meeting place for a permanent revolution. What was not to be interrupted in this meeting place was the revolutionary flow of speech. The theatre turned into a more or less structured space for endless deliberation, a tribune open for everybody who decided to climb on it-. With respect to the occupation of the Sorbonne and May 68 in general, Michel de Certeau therefore spoke about " une révolution de la parole ", a revolution of speech in which the people, by way of an exemplary action, would take their right to speak - what de Certau calls "prendre la parole" or "conquering speech".

" Un événement : la prise de parole. En mai dernier, on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789. La place forte qui a été occupée, c'est un savoir détenu par les dispensateurs de la culture et destiné à maintenir l'intégration ou l'enfermement des travailleurs étudiants et ouvriers dans un système qui leur fixe un fonctionnement. De la prise de la Bastille à la prise de la Sorbonne, entre ces deux symboles, une différence essentielle caractérise l'événement du 13 mai 1968 : aujourd'hui, c'est la parole prisonnière qui a été libérée. "[3]

While the "event" of 68, and of the Odéon in particular, was surely about the conquest of speech, in some moments, the occupation of the Odéon was not only about talking. It was also taken back to the streets. There were instances of carnival and transgression, particularly when theatre costumes were 'confiscated' by the occupants who would then, on the streets, confront the police force in these costumes. As Richard Neville remembers: "The wardrobe department was ransacked and dozens faced the tear gas dressed as centurions, pirates and princesses. The Theatre came into the streets."[4] But what is even more important from a

political point of view: the streets came into the theatre. This metaphor by which the chiasmatic intertwining between theatre and streets, between the literary public sphere and the political public sphere, is indicated, was far from being original. It was not invented in 68. It belongs to the very metaphorical arsenal of revolutions. And now in 68, more than a concept it was a slogan, the '*mot d'ordre*' that had informed the occupation of the Odéon theatre.

In actual fact, the people who were instrumental in identifying the target and then planning and carrying out the occupation in the first place, were artists and actors, among them the painter Jean-Jacques Lebel, who at that time promoted the 'happening' in France, and Julian Beck, the founder of America's Living Theatre.

"On 16 May, Julian [Beck] and Judith [Malina] led the insurrectionary crowd of insurgent students, workers, and actors singing the 'Internationale' and waving black anarchist flags. This throng managed to transform the venerable building into what Julian [Beck] called 'a place of live theatre in which anyone could become an actor'. The entire theatre stage became a stage for twenty-four hour periods of confrontation and debate in which anyone could freely participate. [...] In an atmosphere of tremendous ferment and intensity, reminiscent of the French Revolution in which citizens of all classes seized power and determined the fate of the state, students and workers spoke, and were answered by others. Julian believed that what he saw at the Odéon provided the 'greatest theatre I've ever seen.' As in *Paradise Now*, the 'architecture of elitism and separatism,' the 'barriers between art and life' that only falsified conventional theatre, had been broken, and the result had brought 'theatre into the streets and the street into the theatre.'"[5]

So even as *theatrical* action completely stopped as soon as the theatre was transformed into a *political* public space, what we encounter at the beginning of the enterprise was a certain illusion regarding the possible harmonious merger of art and life, theatre and politics. When Jean-Louis Barrault, the director of the Odéon, spotted Julian Beck among the crowd streaming into the theatre, he shouted: "*What a wonderful happening*, Julian!".[6] Yet it turned out to be less wonderful for himself, as one month later, after the evacuation of the theatre by the police, he was sacked by his minister Malraux. But also the movement itself, during its one month life-time, showed increasing signs of disintegration and in the end would give up the building without any resistance. However, and notwithstanding Julian Beck's fantasy about 'the greatest theatre' he had ever seen, this disintegration was precisely a political disintegration, it was an effect of the political, not the artistic nature of the squatting movement: factionalism abounded, a core group was established, political schisms occurred within the group, it was accused of hegemonizing the project and the remaining members of this committee eventually decided to leave the building. But the artists, among them Lebel and Beck, had already left after only two days of occupation and the political activists had taken over for good. At no point, there was something of an artistic activity in the strict sense involved in the Odéon occupation. When *politics* took over the Odéon theatre in form of endless debate, art in the strict sense was of no use anymore.

In the following essay I will be not so much interested in the moment in which the artists leave than in the moment in which they return. As we have seen, even where it does not correspond to reality, one of the peculiarities of public space lies in the obvious fact that it is frequently conceptualised as theatrical space. There seems to be a secret - or not so secret - metaphorical complicity

between public acting and theatrical acting, between public space and the space of theatre. A complicity that has been observed since the times of the French Revolution. The Odéon affair is an obvious example for an actual "theatre space" turned into a political forum for public debate. Here, culture (or the arts) is transformed into politics. Yet this is only part of the story, because we don't know yet what the source is of this politicization. I submit that what opens and grounds this sort of deliberative public space - which we would also encounter in Hannah Arendt's model of public space - is a more fundamental conflict which can be termed - following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: antagonism - a kind of ontological category of the political. Without the student's rebellion, without the general strike and the barricades in the Quartier Latin, no "prise de parole" and no squatting of the Odéon theatre. Antagonism, at least ontologically, comes first. And in the moment when it occurs and the political takes over, the artistic disappears and the artists leave the building. When I say that the following will be concerned with the moment of their return, then I refer to a rather striking phenomenon that can be observed in the aftermath of revolutionary upheaval: the phenomenon namely that, in a *second* step, public space again turns back into theatrical space and the initial and founding antagonism is publicly re-staged as, for instance, in the 1920 Bolshevik restaging of the storming of the Winter Palace to which I will come back in a moment. Thus, the main claim underlying my argument will be that while the political as such *cannot be staged,* that is to say, the founding event of antagonism *escapes representation*, it nevertheless *has to be staged* in order to become visible at all. In other words, every staging of the political comes late, it is always an *a posteriori* staging of something which has already occurred (or, but who knows, may again occur at any point). This "something" is the true cause of every public. We could say, an absent cause to which political presentation will then

try to give a name. The very *theatricality* of acting - the rhetoricity but also the melodramatic pathos involved to some degree in all forms of truly political acting - is precisely the symptom of this cause.

The political aesthetics of the Sublime

In order to substantiate these rather broad and perhaps still too abstract claims, let us start from to the constitutive moment of modern politics: the French Revolution. Given what I said about the irrepresentability of radical antagonism, the fact that the French Revolution has been experienced historically in accordance with the *aesthetics of the sublime* might be more than an incident. The whole metaphoric arsenal of the sublime (of what Kant calls the dynamic sublime) - descriptions of the Revolution as storm, hurricane, maelstrom, landslide, earthquake, volcanic eruption -, all this can be found in the reports of visitors (revolutionary "tourists") of the events of 1789 and onwards, and do still belong to our present-day vocabulary when it comes to political upheavals. All these metaphors belong to the discourse of the sublime, because they indicate from *within* the field of representation (that is within discourse) an event that breaks into and dislocates this very field of representation, an event whose source is not at our disposal and, in in this sense lies beyond representation.

So if by "the sublime" we do not understand a concept belonging to a particular historical theory of aesthetics but, in a more general way, the representation of something which *as such* must always remain unrepresentable, then political discourse theory, as it was developed by Ernesto Laclau, may help us in understanding the close and necessary relationship between the rhetorics of the

sublime, the instance of revolution and the very logic of political discourse. In Laclau's discourse theory, the question of representation and representability is intrinsically connected to the concept of antagonism. For Laclau, the systematicity of any signifying system - and in order to have meaning we need a certain degree of systematicity - can only be established vis-à-vis a radical outside to this system, a limit which he and Chantal Mouffe name antagonism. At the ground of all social (=discursive) systems there lies a purely negative instance which at one and the same time stabilizes and threatens the stability of the system: "[I]f the systematicity of the system", he holds, "is a direct result of the exclusionary limit [antagonism], it is only that exclusion that grounds the system as such. The point is essential because it results from it that the system cannot have a positive ground and that, as a result, it cannot signify itself in terms of any positive signified."[7] In other words, the limit of the system, while it is constitutive for the system, cannot be represented directly (otherwise it would be already part of the system) - there is no positive signified corresponding to it. But what can happen, on the other hand, is that the outside or the limit of the system *shows* itself in form of the interruption or breakdown of the very process of signification. So if we "are trying to signify the limits of signification - the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense", Laclau says, "there is no direct way of doing so except through the subversion of the process of signification itself. We know, through psychoanalysis, how what is not directly representable - the unconscious - can only find as a means of representation the subversion of the signifying process."[8]

In politics, the name for this irrepresentable instance is, as I said, *antagonism* - a founding moment and a clash between incommensurable representations: "the antagonistic moment of

collision between the various representations [cannot be reduced to space, and] is itself unrepresentable. It is therefore mere event, [mere temporality.]"[9] But again, the fact that it cannot be represented directly does not mean that it has no effects. On the contrary. Antagonism, we have said, is the constituting moment of the social (that is of any signifying system). This implies that at the roots of all social meaning and all order, there is a constitutive exclusion - because by drawing a line, by defining a limit, something always falls outside the system - which afterwards became forgotten and naturalized. But as soon as those naturalized and sedimented social relations are once again reactived by antagonism, these grounding exclusion - and with it the very contingency at the ground of every system (the fact that things could be otherwise) becomes apparent. Laclau therefore speaks about the *revelatory function* of antagonism: "The moment of original institution of the social is the point at which its contingency is *revealed*, since that institution, as we have seen, is only possible through the repression of options that were equally open. To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency - in other words, to reinsert it in the system of real historical options that were discarded - in accordance with our analysis above: by whoeing the terrain of the original violence, of the power relation through which that instituting act took place."[10] Therefore, "[t]he moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the "political"".[11] And, as I would add, this is precisely the moment in which a public sphere is opened which renders visible and brings to light things which were not visible before. "Public sphere" is the name for the locus in which contingency is revealed by antagonism.

So if we come back to the rhetorics of the sublime then the latter appears as a discursive device to speak about a moment which as such remains unrepresentable, or, as Slavoj Zizek puts it: "The paradox of the Sublime (...) is the conversion of the impossibility of presentation into presentation of impossibility".[12] In the political sphere this becomes most obvious in the case of revolutions. If that which is "represented" by the sublime is the unrepresentable, then what is "represented" in the case of a revolution is not one or the other specific demand but the entirely empty concept of a *new order* as *opposed* to the old one, to the *ancien régime*. A revolution in the strict sense does not have any precise location in the field of representation as it happens within the very antagonistic time gap between the old and the new. And insofar as the futural *new order*, to which revolution points at, must be diametrically opposed to the existing and all too well-known old order, it cannot have (in the moment of revolution) any content or object either. For as soon as we are in a position to sufficiently describe *what the new thing actually is*, it is not new anymore - it is already part of the known, "the old". In this sense, the signifier "revolution" points to the outside of signification and so becomes what Laclau calls an empty signifier.

Now, obviously, revolutionary discourse will have to cope with this structural impossibility by dividing a single political space in two opposed fields. For instance, in the French Revolution, the splitting of French society into a new nation and an old regime was the core target of revolutionary articulation. In order to achieve this target, signifiers which happened to sound royalist or to become associated with the *ancien régime* were eradicated. A new calendar was inaugurated. Personal names somehow identified with the *ancien régime* were often replaced by Greek or Roman names of classic heroes; new dress codes were invented, and so on.[13]

In the remaining part of the essay I would like to discuss two possibilities to publicly cope in a theatrical form with this paradox of revolution, that is with the impossibility *and* the simultaneous necessity of representing antagonism. I will call these two possiblitities the *mimetic* and the *melodramatic* aspect of sublime representation. As I am concerned with theatricality and public space, I will concentrate on examples of a theatrical re-staging of the founding moment of antagonism. Again, such *mise-en-scène* of the unrepresentable of course tries the impossible, but nevertheless if we look at the historical instances there seems to be an urgent need to do this, to re-inscribe the constituting event - a moment outside linear time - into the calendarical time of the new regime and to submit it to repetitive rituals, in short: to replace the *public of the event* with the *public of representation*.

The Second Storming of the Winter Palace in 1920

My example for what I call a *mimetic* re-enactment of the revolution is the 1920 mass-spectacle celebrating the third anniversary of the Storming of the Winter Palace. It was directed by Nikolai Evreinov, whose main target as a director, like in the case of Julian Beck, was to merge theatre into life. But this mass spectacle would go beyond the scope of all previous revolutionary festivities, involving 500 musicians in the orchestra, 8000 "actors" and 100.000 spectators who, as spectators, would in a sense also be participating by playing themselves, the revolutionary masses. Even the Winter Palace itself was to be be involved as a gigantic actor and emotional character in the play. So how do we have to imagine the whole spectacle? Let me quote from an article of November 30, 1920:

".... Towards evening the rain died down and the inhabitants of St Petersburg arrived, perhaps not in the number that had been expected, but none the less, at an approximate estimate, at least thirty thousand. And this whole mass of people, who had streamed in from all sides of the city, stood with its back to the Winter Palace, facing the arch of the General Headquarters, where a huge stage had been constructed, consisting of two platforms - a white and a red - connected by a bridge and filled with structures and scenery ... representing factories and enterprises on the red platform and a 'throne room' on the white platform.

At 10 o'clock a gun boomed and the commander's platform attached to Alexander's Column gave the signal to start. The arched bridge flashed and eight trumpeters gave an introductory fanfare. Then they vanished again into the darkness. In the silence Litolf's "Robespierre", performed by the symphony orchestra of the Political Administration of the Petrograd Military District, sounded splendid. And the show began.

It proceeded alternately on the white platform, the red or on the bridge between them.

The characters on the white platform were Kerensky, the provisional Government, dignitaries and grandees of the old regime, the women's batallion, the *junkers*, bankers and merchants, front-line soldiers, cripples and invalids, enthusiastic ladies and gentlemen of a conciliatory type.

The red platform was more 'impersonal'. There it was the mass that reigned, first drab, foolish and unorganised, but then increasingly active, orderly and powerful. Roused by 'militias', it turned into the Red Guard, made fast with crimson banners.

The action was built on the struggle between the two platforms. It began with the Bolshevik June uprising and ended with the square on which the fate of the powerless ministers was decided.

The bridge between the two worlds was the arena of their clashes. This is where people fought and killed, here people triumphed and from here they retreated.

The first light that illuminated the whites showed their triumph in caricatured form. To the strains of the 'Marseillaise', arranged as a Polonaise, Kerensky appeared before the expectant ladies and gentlemen. The actor who played Kerensky, dressed in the characteristic khaki, captured the premier's gestures very well and provoked particular attention among the crowd...

But meanwhile the revolution continued... The red platform became more organized after suffering losses; troops went over to the side of the 'Leninists'. And the ministers sitting at a table peacefully in their top hats, rocked amusingly in their seats, like little Chinese idols.

Then came the moment of escape and vehicles started rumbling near the steps leading down from the white platform to the wooden pavement.

There they rushed, caught by the beam of a searchlight, and artillery roared. The air resounded with the volleys fired from the *Aurora*, anchored on the Nevy, the rattle of rifles and machine guns.

Then the action transferred to the Winter Palace. Light would flash on in the windows of the sleeping giant and the figures of the people fighting would be visible. The attack ended. The Palace was captured. The banner of the victors appeared deep purple out of

the darkness above the palace. Five red stars lit up on the pediment. Then rockets went up and diamond-like stars lit up the sky, and waterfalls of fireworks gushed down in a rain of sparks.

The 'Internationale' sounded and the parade of the victors began, illuminated by the searchlight and fireworks...

This is a general outline of what the spectators gathered on Uritsky Square witnessed in the course of an hour and a quarter."[14]

Now, this spectacle was taking place at Uritsky Square in front of the Winter Palace, but was there in any way a *public space* emerging, *public* in the strict political sense? Another contemporary observer did express this hope by saying that perhaps this was: "the beginning of a new road, a road which will lead across the square to the theatre of the future, and which may lead us back to the long forgotten Greek *agora*."[15] But he hoped in vain, for if the public in the radical sense is a public established by the event of antagonism, then a mere "representation" or restaging of that founding moment will not do the trick - the reason for this being, as simple as it may sound, that the dramatization of the storming is not the storming. And what is even more important, the staging of antagonism is not antagonism - as antagonism itself is, as we saw in Laclau, simply "unstageable", unrepresentable. Rather, we encounter a quasi-mimetic representation of antagonistic conflict, represented by the struggle between the red stage and the white stage, and a mimicry of the public, that is to say a quasi-public.

Maybe the place within Evreinov's arrangement which comes closest to the public in the radical sense of antagonism is the bridge as that which separates and simultaneously connects the two opposing forces. But *as a bridge* it still remains within field of

representation. And as a representational device it can be translated easily from theatre into very different artistic genres. For instance into sculpture, as in Nikolai Kolli's *"The Red Wedge cleaving the White bloc"*, exhibited on Moscow's Revolution Square at the occasion of the First Anniversary of the Revolution in 1918. Or into other media like posters, as in El Lissitzky's famous poster for the Western Front of 1920: "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge". Abstract as this may be, it is still representational - representing the Civil War between Whites and Reds - and its meaning is more than plain.

The Melodrama

The new dramatic genre corresponding to all this is the *melodrama*. It emerged within an abounding mood of theatricality and theatricalisation within this sublime conjuncture, where there was a boost of new plays being set on stage. While before the revolution we can find only a handful of premieres, in the years between 1789 and 1799, 1500 new theatre plays emerged. But the most important aspect of this theatrical mood - which we can also find in the political sphere - was that the revolution was accompanied by a new dramatic genre - the *melodrama*. Why does the melodrama, as a genre, fit so perfectly into the revolutionary situations that it became important became again for the Paris Commune and for the Bolshevik Revolution? Obviously, there is a certain analogy between melodrama and revolutionary speech. As Peter Brooks put it: "saying that melodrama was the artistic genre of the Revolution is nearly a truism, since revolutionary public speech itself (...) is already melodramatic".[16]

But the most obvious similarities, as Brooks specifies, are clearly to be found in performativity. Let's take the most famous revolutionary melodrama, Sylvain Maréchal's *Le Jugement dernier des rois*. The plot is not particularly sophisticated: The play assembles all the European kings on an island and kills them off at the end of the play by a volcanic eruption. This volcanic eruption is obviously the metaphor of Revolution as the dynamic sublime. What Peter Brooks argues is that the rhetoric of this play is performative and can be put into the following formula: "*Le Jugement dernier des rois* in effect says: 'Be it enacted that there are no more kings'".[17] And he adds: "melodrama is the genre, and the speech, of revolutionary moralism: the way it states, enacts, and imposes its moral messages, in clear, unambiguous words and signs".[18]But this clearness and unambiguousness is not simply given, it has to be produced: all ambiguities have to be synthesized into a manichean division between a "we" and a "them", between the friends of the people and the counter-revolutionaries. And the mechanism by which this works is precisely the mechanism of melodrama - which is why melodrama is the political genre par excellence.

In order to substantiate that claim let us consult Robert B. Heilman who, in order to distinguish between tragedy and melodrama, has introduced the highly influential concepts of monopathy as quasi-wholeness: "by monopathy I mean the singleness of feeling that gives one the sense of wholeness".[19] This is typical for the melodramatic character: "In the structure of melodrama man is essentially 'whole'", which means, "there is an absence of the basic inner conflict"[20], which one can find in the *tragic* man, who is torn apart by different conflicting forces, like passions and duties or freedom and fate. The difference, according to Heilman, is that in "tragedy the conflict is within man, in

melodrama it is between men".[21] Or, as James L. Smith, commenting on Heilman, puts it: "It is the total dependence upon external adversaries which finally separates melodrama from all other serious dramatic forms" - external enemies such as "an evil man, a social group, a hostile ideology, a natural force, an accident or chance, an obdurate fate or malign deity".[22] In melodrama, the question is not *what* kind of sentiment is produced within the spectator - be it courage, enthusiasm, happiness, triumph, despair, hopelessness. The only important matter is that it is only *a single* sentiment that is produced - which is the reason why Heilman speaks of *mono*-pathy.

So if in melodrama inner "dividedness is replaced by a quasi-wholeness"[23], and monopathy thus has ordering function, then this unification of the inner self can only be established against an outside, against the other. In Laclau's words, a limit and antagonism has to be erected if some stability and systematicity is to be achieved. Not surprisingly, Heilman himself draws this parallel when he remarks that "melodrama has affinities with politics, tragedy with religion".[24] And:

"In the competition for public power that is pragmatic politics, one conquers or is conquered: the public stance of every party, the operating 'platform' of every contestant, is that what is going on is a conflict between right and wrong (...) 'Our side' is the 'good man', and 'they' are the 'flaw'; the Aristotelian tragic hero is broken up into two separate competitors, whose combat is the public form of political activity as we know it. Unlike the tragic hero, the political hero is a part of the human whole doing duty for the whole, that is, representing this or that crystallization of feeling or desire that is identified with 'the good', and striving to put opposing forces out of business."[25]

The point here is, that while the tragic subject could be called a paralyzed spectator of his or her own inner turmoil the melodramatic subject definitely is an actor. The passage from dispersion to homogeneity and from dividedness to wholeness is also a passage from the spectator to the actor. Such production of a single feeling within the spectator in order to transform him/her into an actor, is precisely what lies behind the idea of agit-prop and of all those nearly one hundred sub- and sub-sub-genres of agit-prop as Daniel Gerould found them in the repertory index of the USSR of 1929: agit-etude, hygienic-agit, agit-grotesque, atheistic-satire, agit-trial or Red-Army-Performance-Pieces.[26] All of these genres are inheritors of classical melodrama, which was a highly important genre for Russian revolutionary theatre in its own right. And, as James L. Smith argued, it remained so in 1960s and 70s protest theatre: "Protest theatre has many aims: to stimulate political awareness, question established values, expose injustice, champion reform, fuel arguments on ways and means and sometimes to incite direct support for bloody revolution. The result may be a satire, homily, cartoon, revue or straight-play-with-a-message, but underneath the fashionable trimmings the essential form is melodrama".[27]

Why can melodrama do this? So far, I've mentioned a couple of reasons: Melodrama is agitational, it sets people in motion - by setting them in *e-motion*. It is political because it is a drama *between* actors, not a tragedy *within* actors. These other actors act as my *antagonists* thus giving a sense of unity to my very own identity even where they, at the same time, threaten my identity. Let me, by way of ending, add a further reason. And this has to do with the fact that the *melodramatic* form of enactment gives an answer to the problem of the revolutionary sublime, that is, to the radical

break with the past, to radical antagonism as that which cannot be represented *eo ipso*.

So, what is this answer, the answer of the melodramatic actor who is confronted with the impossible task of representing the unrepresentable? This answer is not given in speech or verbal language. Rather, it is given on the somatic level of action, in form of the well-known *hystericization of the melodramatic body*. As Peter Brooks has shown, the hystericized bodies of melodrama behave in way which reminds of the psychoanalytical concept of "acting out". It is in this sense that they *enact* something - antagonism, the revolution, the new order - which as such escapes representation. [28] The inability to verbalize the experience of something that lies beyond verbalization (the revolutionary sublime) leads to the hysterization of the body, that is, to somatic enacting, or rather: *acting out*. For Brooks, by the way, this is also the reason why pantomime plays such an important role in revolutionary melodrama. And Heilman, concerning such bodily action, speaks of a melodramatic "catharsis" arising out of the "exercising" of certain impulses: "Where I use the term, I would give it the sense of 'working off' or 'working out' or simply 'working'".[29] What else is this"working out" if not to the "acting out" observed by Peter Brooks in melodrama.

In order to fully understand this it might be fruitful to refer back to the psychoanalytic origin of the term "acting out". Analytically speaking, acting-out originally means the attempt at breaking the frame of the analysis (it is a form of transference) in a non-verbal way, for instance by coming consistently late to the session. *A forteriori*, it can also be a form of repetition-compulsion symptomatically reflecting, on the basis of an unconscious fantasy, some previous traumatic experience.[30] In our case, in the political case, it is the inability to verbalize, reflect on and work-

through the, as it were, "traumatic" event of antagonism and radical rupture, which leads to forms of acting-out. Seen from this angle, antagonism - as that which cannot be represented directly - nevertheless is symptomatically reflected in form of a melodramatical acting-out which is not "conscious" in the same way as the (always failing) artistic representations of antagonism I have described previously. It is not a representation, it is a somatic and compulsive effect triggered by an absent cause. This could then explain the physical convulsion or cartoon-like 'deformation' that always
accompanies revolutionary speech (but also the revolutionary *journée* and its carnivalesc aspects), so that the "prise de parole" is, at the same, a somatic enactment of something which *eo ipso* cannot be verbalized and escapes every "parole".

As we said in the beginning, that which cannot be signified directly shows itself only through the very breakdown of signification. Peter Brooks's point is that the hysterical somatic "enactment", which is so typical of melodrama, must be understood as exactly the symptom of such breakdown. Our point is that every political action does have a moment of acting out to the extent that it relates to *antagonism* as something which is not representable as such and therefore cannot be verbalized.

The whole argument of my paper can thus be condensed in the claim that we do not have access to *antagonism* in the strict ontological sense, yet this does not mean that the ontological category of antagonism is useless nor does it mean that radical antagonism does not exist. Why? Because the theoretical ontological notion of antagonism is useful because it provides us with a limit concept which points at the conditions of possibility and impossibility of "actually existing" antagonisms and conflicts in

the plural as well as of "public spheres" in the plural. And because it *does exist*, namely in form of its dislocatory effects in reality.

Jumping

However, let me, by way of ending this essay, now claim the exact opposite of what I just said: There is indeed a way to gain *direct access* to radical antagonism (if only an exceptional way). This way is indicated in psychoanalysis by a further concept which must be carefully distinguished from the concepts of acting out: the concept of "passage à l'act". Where is the difference? As once Jacques-Alain Miller made it clear, that *acting out* - as for instance in melodrama - always happens on a scene, resp. on a stage, under the gaze of the other. So, according to Miller one can only speak about *acting out* as soon as there is *a scene* upon which the subject starts acting in front of an audience.[31] However, in the case of a "passage à l'acte" which is not concerned with *acting* but, rather, with *the act* in the radical sense, there is no stage anymore. Any such real act, that is to say: any act worth this name, is, for Miller, a transgression of a code, of law, of a symbolic whole. It risks leaving the other behind, it escapes any dialectics, any ambivalence of thinking, of the word, of language. It is, in Miller's words, a *NO* shouted towards the other. The only way to do this is by jumping out of the scene, by leaving the theatre, as it were. But since the subject can never leap far enough and therefore never reaches the other side, s/he falls into an abyss. Every real act is transgression but real transgression is impossible (and this is where the model differs significantly from Deleuze or Bachtin who would subscribe to the first part of the sentence but renounce the second part). It is impossible - except in one case: in suicide.

If we apply this to the field of politics, the question of course arises whether revolution, if it is taken seriously, isn't just a name for such a suicidal rupture. It was Saint Just who said that what constitutes the republic is the total destruction of everything that is opposed to it. And at some point, this turned out to include the revolutionaries themselves. It is this suicidal logic of revolutions - based on the aim to enact *antagonism* in the purest form - which explains to some extent the progressive self-eradication of the French revolutionaries. This act of transgression towards something to which we have no access was driven by the idea to enact Antagonism with a capital A, of establishing a total break with the past, a radical rupture, and of completely leaving the old and entering the new. But a direct enactment of antagonism and of radical rupture, can only be suicidal. Antagonism may be put on stage in a vain effort at representation, but this will never be "the real thing", it will always be a sublimated, dramatized, representational second order version of antagonism. Jumping into "the real thing" means jumping from the roof.[32]

For this very reason psychoanalysis as well as politics has to abandon this phantasy of a radical rupture and of an existential leap into the political and to more or less restrict itself to a passage towards an always partial and necessarily unsuccessful act (at least if one does not want to kill the patient). The name for such politics would not be revolution, but it could be radical democracy.

But how would such politics this relate to theatre? As Janelle Reinelt puts it in her *Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre*, this implies "a theatrical space patronized by consensual community of citizen-spectators who come together at stagings of the social imaginary in order to consider and experience affirmation, contestation, and reworking of various material and discursive practices pertinent to the constitution of a democratic society."

And it implies moving "to a truly radical form of civic spectatorship [that] involves negotiation and contestation, and a fundamental transformation of the traditional 'spectator' function from consumer to agent".[33] If such a radical democratic theatre will still be enacted on a stage, it can only be the stage of the political.

---

[1] quoted in Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey: *"Die Phantasie an die Macht". Mai 68 in Frankreich*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1995, p.441.

[2] quoted in Paul-Louis Mignon: *Jean-Louis Barrault. Le théâtre total*, Monaco : Éditions du Rocher 1999, p. 286.

[3] Michel de Certeau: *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques*, Paris : *Éditions du Seuil*, 1994, p.40

[4] quoted in Baz Kershaw: *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, London and New York: Routlegde 1999, p. 100.

[5] John Tytell: *The Living Theatre. Art, Exile, and Outrage*, New York: Grove Press 1995, p.232-3.

[6] Paul-Louis Mignon: *Jean-Louis Barrault. Le théâtre total*, Monaco : Éditions du Rocher 1999, p. 285.

[7] Ernesto Laclau: *Emancipation(s)*, London and New York: Verso 1996, p.38.

[8] ibid., p.39.

[9] Ernesto Laclau: *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London and New York: Verso 1990, p.83.

[10] ibid., p.34.

[11] ibid., p.35.

[12]Slavoj Zizek: *For they know not what they do*, London and New York: Verso 1991, p.88

[13]See Lynn Hunt: *Politics, Culture, and Class in French Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1984.

[14] quoted in Vladimir Tolstoy, Irina Bibikova, Catherine Cook: Street Art of the Revolution. Fetsivals and Celebrations in Russia 1918-33, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

[15] quoted in Robert Leach: *Revolutionary Theatre*, London and New York: Routledge 1994, p.49.

[16] Peter Brooks: "Melodrama, Body, Revolution," in J. Bratton, J. Cook, C. Gledhill (eds.): *Melodrama*, London: British Film Institute 1994, p.16. The first thing that comes to mind in this respect is the obvious tension between the tendentially non-verbal, bodily enactment of melodrama and the rhetorical maneuvers of revolutionary public speech. The main characteristic of the revolutionary years under Robespierre was - according to Claude Lefort
- that the terror was not silent at all. Quite on the contrary: *the terror speaks* (Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, Paris: Seuil, 1986), since it is a democratic terror. It constantly has to justify itself. If Lefort is right then what we encounter in this speech act of revolutionary "terroristic" rhetorics is a strange chiasmus between terror and virtue, between enactment and justification. And if it is true that terror has to be verbally justified in terms of virtue then it is equally true that virtue has to be enacted by means of terror. The two stages - the stage for justification the stage for

justification (the parliament) and the stage for decapitation (the guillotine) - intrinsically belong together.

[17] Brooks, "Melodrama", p.17.

[18] ibid., p.16.

[19]Robert B. Heilman: *Tragedy and Melodrama*, Seattle and London: Washington University Press 1968, p.85.

[20] ibid., p.79.

[21] ibid., p.81.

[22]James L. Smith: *Melodrama*, London: Methuen 1973, p.8.

[23] Heilman, *Tragedy*, p.86.

[24] ibid., p.90.

[25] ibid., p.91.

[26]See Daniel Gerould: "Melodrama and Revolution", in J. Bratton, J. Cook, C. Gledhill (eds.): *Melodrama,* London: British Film Institute 1994.

[27] Smith, *Melodrama*, p. 37.

[28]On the other hand, the Revolution has to be staged *incessently* in order to make sure of it.

[29] Heilman, *Tragedy*, p.84.

[30] Lacan himself differentiates between *symptom* and *acting out*, for reasons of space, however, I treat both aspects as synonymous.

[31]Jacques-Alain Miller: "Jacques Lacan: Bemerkungen über sein Konzept des Passage à l'acte," in *Wo Es War,* 7-8: pp.39-49.

[32] However, this does not do away with the necessity of radical antagonism (or the radical Act) as a limit concept. To put the argument in deconstructive terms, we may assume that the "passage à l'acte" is the condition of (im-) possibility of acting. Just as the constitutive outside of signification is the condition of (im-)possibility of signification. On the other hand there can be *gradual* acting out because a finally succeeding "passage à l'acte" is impossible. There can be "acting" because the Act, with a capital A, never succeeds (and Act can be read in the Lacanian sense of sexual act as well, in the sense of sex as Real, of something impossible that never succeeds either), at least not without destroying its own conditions of possibility.

[33] Janelle Reinelt: "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge Indeterminacy", in Jeanne Colleran und Jenny S. Spencer (eds.): *Staging Resistance. Essays on Political Theater*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1998, p. 286.