



**L'ODÉON EST
OUVERT !!!
THEATRICAL ACTIVISM
IN PARIS
1968 AND 2021
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SUMMARY

The Théâtre Odéon in Paris has a long history of occupation and political protest. On 15 May 1968, students, artists, and workers converted the iconic monument into a political stage to express their concerns and dissatisfaction with the conservative political system of President Charles de Gaulle. After occupations in 1992 and 2016, the theatre has once more become the stage of political protest and centre of public attention. On 4 March 2021, protestors occupied the Théâtre Odéon to fight for support for the two hundred and seventy-five thousand *intermittents du spectacle*, i.e. cultural part-time workers, who have been deprived of their work and livelihood due to the coronavirus pandemic. This paper examines theatrical practices, symbolic elements, mobilising techniques, and means of communication during the Odéon occupations and places a particular focus on the intertwined relationship between aesthetics and politics that develops as soon as protest movements conquer a cultural institution.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Théâtre Odéon à Paris a une longue histoire d'occupation et de contestation politique. Le 15 mai 1968, étudiants, artistes et ouvriers ont transformé le monument emblématique en scène politique pour exprimer leurs inquiétudes et leur mécontentement face au système politique conservateur du président Charles de Gaulle. Après les occupations de 1992 et 2016, le théâtre est redevenu la scène de la contestation politique et le centre de l'attention publique. Le 4 mars 2021, des manifestants ont occupé le Théâtre Odéon pour lutter pour le soutien des 275.000 intermittents du spectacle, privés de leur travail et de leurs moyens de subsistance à cause de la pandémie de coronavirus. Cet article examine les pratiques théâtrales, les éléments symboliques, les techniques de mobilisation et les moyens de communication pendant les occupations de l'Odéon et met un accent particulier sur les relations imbriquées entre esthétique et politique, dès que des mouvements contestataires conquièrent une institution culturelle.

INTRODUCTION

As soon as the evening performance by the Paul Taylor Dance Company ended on 15 May 1968 and the neatly dressed spectators left the Théâtre Odéon in Paris, over three thousand students, artists, and workers stormed the building and occupied the halls, balconies, boxes, orchestra pit, and stage. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German student involved in the May Revolution, proclaimed ‘[w]e must consider this theater, once a symbol of bourgeois and Gaullist culture, now an instrument of combat against the bourgeoisie’ (quoted in Feenberg and Freedman 2001: 40). The protestors converted the theatre into a political stage, a ‘tribune libre’ to express their concerns and dissatisfaction with capitalism and the conservative political system under president Charles de Gaulle.

The Theatrical Nature of Political Protest

In spring 2021, more than eighty cultural institutions in France were occupied by protestors after repeated shutdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic. Independent artists had been especially hard-hit by the crisis and thus fought for visibility and political attention. From 4 March to 23 May, a group of forty-two artists occupied the Théâtre Odéon. Is the legacy of 1968 still present during the occupation of 2021? To what extent do these two manifestations of resistance that conquered and repurposed the monumental theatre differ with regard to their theatrical practices, symbolic elements, mobilising techniques, and means of communication? How have the protestors expanded their repertoires of linguistic and embodied actions?

This essay examines theatrical practices of the Odéon occupations in 1968 and 2021 from a comparative point of view and situates them within the wider context of major ideological and political struggles in France. While the *enragés*¹ of May 68 converted the large theatre hall into an open-access forum for political debates and used speech as a means to renegotiate society, the occupants of 2021 transferred their protest space to the forecourt of the Odéon — due to Covid measures only a limited number of people was permitted inside — and expanded their visibility to a global media space by either uploading pre-recordings or livestreaming collective action. The public theatre was chosen in an attempt to continue a history of protest, yet its symbolic significance has changed over the past fifty years.

1. The term *enragés* (literally ‘madmen’) originally designated a group of extreme revolutionaries under the leadership of the priest Jacques Roux during the French Revolution. They demanded social and economic support for the lower classes. The term was then reused by student activists in May 1968.

Political protests mark a legitimate way to publicly express disapproval in opposition to a status quo which the protestors are unable or powerless to change themselves. Consequently, policymakers in the government or private organisations are addressed in the presence of a general public, which increases the pressure on the protestors’ target group to act or stop acting in a certain way. According to the American sociologist Ralph Herbert Turner, an act of protest is intended to draw attention to grievances within a system. As ameliorative measures can only be taken by a third party, the protestors depend on a combination of sympathy and fear on behalf of their target group (1969: 816). The German-American sociologist Rudolf Heberle acknowledges that protest movements do not merely represent a public statement for or against political decisions, but instead raise the claim to co-create the existing social reality (1967: 6).

Political protest occurs in — literally physical or medially transmitted — social spaces that guarantee visibility and generate the potential for collective action. Typically, the street — a seemingly neutral route connecting private and public venues, permitting movement, transport, and exchange of people and goods between these separate locations — becomes the stage for political protest. As soon as a group of protestors stops the regular flow of movement by blocking the street in the form of a sit-in, their ‘unconventional behaviour’ disturbs the order of the communal system, interrupts the daily functioning of society and, thereby, attracts public attention.

Exploring the political-symbolic use of public space in Berlin from 1900 to 1914, Thomas Lindenberger distinguishes between top-down

and bottom-up street politics. While police forces take preventive measures to guarantee state security and maintain the public order (top-down), dynamic confrontations in the form of verbally explicit and bodily implicit actions by the common people challenge those in power (bottom-up) (1995: 13–15). Thus, the street, on the one hand, serves as a visual manifestation of public order and the existing social hierarchy; visibility facilitates surveillance and control according to Michel Foucault. On the other hand, however, the street may be transformed into a stage for political demands and protest rituals; visibility generates power and the potential for collective action according to Hannah Arendt.

In May 1968, French students discovered the street as an available medium to voice social criticism, question traditional values, reject political authorities, fight for free expression, and dream of a new society. In an interview Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theatre who partook in the Odéon occupation on 15 May 1968, emphasised ‘The street is a great mystical venue. It belongs to everybody, it belongs to nobody’ (quoted in Rosenthal 1998: 150). Viewing the street as the most egalitarian public place, distant from institutionalised channels of information subjected to government control and censorship, students relocated their discussions from lecture halls to public venues and, thereby, invited intellectuals, artists, and factory workers to join.

Maurice Blanchot notes, ‘[s]ince May 1968 the street has awakened: it speaks. [...] Once again the street is alive, powerful and sovereign: a venue of all possible freedom’ (2003: 180).² The public expressions of this multifaceted political movement were completely heterogeneous with regard to their *content*, e.g., topics ranging from the Vietnam War to contraception, and their *form*, e.g., verbal utterances in assemblies, meetings, and demonstrations as well as written statements on flyers, posters, and mural paintings (Canut 2009: para. 10).

Michel de Certeau states, ‘[e]n mai dernier on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789’ (‘Last May, we took the speech, just as we took the Bastille in 1789’) (1994: 40). While the medieval armoury and political prison, the Bastille, was interpreted as a symbol of royal authority and the monarch’s abuse of power, the *enragés* of 1968 seized the Sorbonne, ‘a temple of learning and house of cultural initiation’ and the Théâtre Odéon, ‘the citadel of traditional culture’ (Feenberg and Freedman 2001: 41). The documentary film *Le Droit à la parole* (*The Right to Speak*) by Michel Andrieu released in 1978 depicts how students and workers rose to speak and, thereby, took possession of their own voice. Pierre Nora even describes the happenings of May 1968 as a ‘festival de la parole agissante’ (‘a festival of the acting speech’) that united ‘speeches by protest leaders and anonymous participants, words by students and workers, original and cited phrases, slogans written on walls and posters, political, poetic, educational and messianic words, speeches without words and pure noise’ (1972: 163).

2. Quotations in French have been translated into English by the author.

'L'Odéon est ouvert !!!'



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in May 1968 © Eric Koch
Courtesy of National Archives of the Netherlands / Photo Collection Anefo

According to Cécile Canut, human speech was not only a means of expression during the student revolution, but even constituted the event itself; speech had become performance, the substance of the political movement (2009: para. 2). While speech had so far been reserved for political authorities who used it as an instrument to manipulate and control the people, it was then substituted by a 'parole libre' which found its expression in humour and irony, equivocation and subversion (ibid.: para. 6). In light of this, the bourgeois Théâtre Odéon was occupied and transformed into an open forum for political debates. Class distinctions and social status should be temporarily suspended to permit every actor visibility to articulate their individual stories and concerns. At the renamed 'Odéon-Théâtre libre' the occupants discussed 'issues that went far beyond the subject of culture' (Loyer 2011: 318–9), like politics, philosophy, and utopian visions of a new society.

On 3 May 1968, four hundred students demonstrated in the courtyard of the Sorbonne University and publicly criticised the outdated, overburdened education system in France. The centralistic structure and hierarchical administration of universities was perceived as obsolete and discriminating. Universities, even those which were situated close to the *bidonvilles*, did not tackle the actual needs of society in the lecture halls. Moreover, the imbalance between the increasing number of students and the limited career opportunities led to economic and social insecurity among the young population (Jurt 2009: 64). To end the demonstration, the rector of the Sorbonne University Jean Roche called the police who then forced the protestors off the premises and arrested several students. On 7 May, twenty thousand protestors in Paris expressed their dissatisfaction with low-wage jobs, bad living conditions, little social mobility, and economic inequalities, which even led to street fights with the police in the Latin Quarter during the so-called 'Night of the Barricades' on 10 May. Three days later, altogether nine million workers went on strike in France and seized control of the factories. Prime Minister Georges Pompidou ordered the police to withdraw from the Sorbonne on 13 May, whereupon the protesting students seized the university and raised a red flag. The celebrations of their victory were accompanied by impromptu jam sessions (Drott 2011: 2). Paul Berman describes the utopian exhilaration of the '68 generation world-wide as permeated by the belief 'that a superior new society was already coming into existence' (1997: 9). Amidst this tumultuous atmosphere, students and artists met and envisioned the occupation of the Théâtre Odéon.

Patrick Ravignant published an anonymous report of two hundred and fifty-five pages written by a member of the Comité d'Action

Révolutionnaire during the theatre occupation. On the evening of 13 May, the assembled students declared that art was no longer communication, exaltation, magic, but had become a consumer product dominated by the scandalous myth of stardom, completely cut off from life, parked in museums, galleries, or theatres. This kind of art would only nurture passivity, irresponsibility, narcissism, cowardice, and stupidity. Thus, venues of cultural production should be boycotted (Ravignat 1968: 34). On this very evening, the occupation of the Théâtre Odéon was decided.

'Let's take a theatre,' someone said.

'The Comédie-Française?'

'Non, it's like the Academy, too dusty, already dead...'

Indeed the impact would have been zero. It had to be a 'young' theatre that truly embodied the art of this consumer society.

'So, let's take the Odéon!'

'Yes, that's it,' everyone shouted, 'Let's take the Odéon!'

(Ravignat 1968: 35)

Its representative architecture gave the Odéon the reputation of a venue reserved for the cultural elite, a symbol of bourgeois supremacy, a national theatre under de Gaulle's Presidency. Yet, a glimpse at the history of the Odéon and its artistic director Jean-Louis Barrault reveals a more ambivalent picture.

The formerly called Théâtre-Français was inaugurated by Marie-Antoinette on 9 April 1782 and already in its early days became the site of a theatre scandal: *Le mariage de Figaro* by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais in 1784 (Baecque 2010: 31–5).³ The theatre's history

³ The comedy in five acts *La Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* is today considered a forerunner of the French Revolution, as it questioned the archaic privileges of the aristocracy and criticised the social injustices of the Ancien Régime.

is marked by its frequent renaming: during the French Revolution in 1789, the National Assembly baptised the emblematic venue Théâtre de la Nation, whereupon a group of actors renamed it Théâtre de l'Égalité 'by and for the people'. Since 1796, the name Odéon was mostly used in allusion to the antique 'Odeum', i.e. a site for sung declarations, literally a 'singing place', while Napoleon preferred to call it 'Théâtre de Sa Majesté l'Impératrice et Reine' (Bredeson 2018: 29). Following an invitation by theatre director Thomas Sauvage in 1827, British actors staged the first continental performances of Shakespearean plays in English (Rootering 2010: 88). Sarah Bernhardt celebrated her first successful performances with François Coppée's *Le passant* (*The Passerby*) in 1869 and Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas* (*Ruy Blas*) in 1872 at the Théâtre Odéon before joining the Comédie-Française (ibid.: 106–7).

Jean-Louis Barrault, who had taken over the artistic direction of the Odéon in 1959, did not only include a canon of classical plays in his repertoire, but also contemporary dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras, and Eugène Ionesco. The Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, founded together with his wife Madeleine Renaud, caused a scandal when staging Genet's *Les Paravents* (*The Screens*) directed by Roger Blin in 1966, which explicitly criticised French policy during the Algerian War. Interestingly, students of the UNEF (Union nationale des étudiants de France), including Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who later became a symbol of the May Revolution as 'Dany le Rouge', stood up for Barrault and defended his decision to stage the scandalous play (Goetschel 2010: 176). Due to his progressive and innovative attitude, Barrault could only mistakenly have been perceived as antagonistic to the student revolts two years later. According to Martin Zenck, the protests were directed against the self-representation of the French state in public and the supremacy of national cultural institutions, but did not criticise the theatre director and his ensemble (2009: 46).

The report published by Patrick Ravignant lists various reasons why the Odéon constituted the ideal venue to expand the student revolts. First and foremost, it was situated close to the Sorbonne, which would facilitate the cooperation with the university occupation. As a national theatre, the Odéon represented a cultural institution under governmental control. Well aware that Barrault was a self-declared political leftist and also programmed avant-garde plays, the protestors considered this circumstance an even greater danger. Enacting a make-believe revolution on stage would in fact discourage the real revolution among the audience, they argued (Ravignant 1968: 38–9). On 17 May 1968, a student representative explained to the radio journalist Pierre Janin that the Odéon would only ‘hide behind such stuff like Genet’ and was, thus, ‘even more dangerous’ to their revolutionary ambitions (quoted in Janin 1968a: 02:50). Graffiti sprayed on the theatre confirmed this conviction: ‘Let us not dwell on the show of protest, but let’s move on to the protest of this show’ (quoted in Soulé 2008: para. 3).

‘L’imagination prend le pouvoir !’

On 15 May, rumours circulated that the Mouvement du 22 Mars⁴ was planning the occupation of the Odéon. Yet, as no protestors were in sight and the evening performance of Paul Taylor’s dance company could take place as scheduled, Barrault and Renaud left the theatre and went home. Around 11 p.m. they received a telephone call by Félix

4. The association dated back to 22 March 1968, when students occupied the University of Nanterre to protest against the arrest of seven members of the Comité Vietnam National (CVN) in opposition to the Vietnam War.

Giacomoni, administrative director of the Odéon, who informed them that a crowd of three thousand students, artists, and workers had entered the building. Francis Raison, director at the Ministère des Affaires culturelles, remembers having received the following instructions: ‘avoid any bloody confrontation, leave the doors of the theatre open, dialogue with the demonstrators and “accompany” them — that was the word used — as long as possible’ (Raison 1994: 57). In view of the cramped hall, the theatre ensemble was worried about fire safety regulations: the dancer Micky Berger screamed, ‘Watch out for fire, and most importantly, do not smoke!’ and Michel Bertey, Barrault’s assistant, distributed leaflets with the telephone number of the nearest fire brigade (Rauch-Lepage 1994: 74). In 1799 and 1818, the Odéon had already been the victim of a large fire, whereupon its personnel were cautious to prevent any further tragedy.

What followed was a night of speeches, debates, and non-stop discussions. The French artist and political activist Jean-Jacques Lebel declared, ‘Comrades, the Odéon [...] has become a centre of revolutionary expression and creation, an emergency station and refuge; the imagination takes power! You can do and say whatever you want! You are art! You are the revolution! The Odéon is open to everyone!’ (quoted in Ravignant 1968: 55). In an interview of 2008, Judith Malina recalls her observations:

People stood up and talked about their hopes and their fears, about what they should do and what they shouldn’t do, and read poetry. Late that night, Jean-Louis Barrault [...] came through the back of the house and Julian [Beck] was onstage, and Barrault said, “what a great show you’re putting on here. What a wonderful performance!” Then there began a long siege during which, twenty-four hours a day, there was talk, talk, talk—revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak. (quoted in Pellerin 2018: E3)



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in May 1968 © Eric Koch
Courtesy of National Archives of the Netherlands / Photo Collection Anefo

For the upcoming days, Barrault suggested continuing the scheduled dance performances parallel to the theatre occupation and reminded the student radicals that ‘Paul Taylor has danced in Cuba: he is with you, he is a revolutionary!’ (quoted in Ravignat 1968: 60). However, his suggestion was only shouted down. Instead, the protest leaders read a public declaration on the following morning, broadcasted by the national television station ORTF: ‘Artists, actors, students, and workers decided to found a revolutionary action committee on the premises of bourgeois culture. The Odéon was chosen not to personally attack a company, but to have the Théâtre de France cease to be a theatre for an unlimited period. With 16 May, it has become a meeting place

between workers, students, artists, and actors’ (ORTF 1968: 01:10). A large banner saying ‘L’Odéon est ouvert!!!’ was attached on the balustrade of the theatre amidst the golden lettering ‘Odéon Théâtre de France’. Instead of the French tricolour, the red flag of communism and the black flag of anarchy decorated the noble entrance. The author Hervé Hamon remembers, ‘Nobody knew where all of that would lead, not even us, the students. Everybody was allowed to talk; and everybody talked at once’ (quoted in Veiel 2018: para. 5).

However, the utopian vision to grant ‘everybody’ unrestricted possibilities to express themselves did not include all members of the French society in equal shares.⁵ Julie Pagis’s study of May 68 based on questionnaires and interviews with three hundred and fifty participants reveals that ‘[f]eelings of legitimacy and competence in public speaking, as well as responsibilities in activist organisations are primarily associated with men from upper-class backgrounds [...], even when they had limited experience in activism’ (2018: 90). Women of May 68 chose forms of participation that were ‘less institutionalised’ and ‘more on the fringes of (or outside) the main union, activist, or partisan organisations’ (ibid.: 89). Khursheed Wadia remarks the absence of women in images and accounts of May 68, yet their contribution in the background was massive and unprecedented (1993: 150–51). It is criticised that marginalised groups did not have the same chance to speak up and defend their rights. In his study on gay liberation in the occupied Sorbonne, Michael Sibalís argues that ‘the attitude towards homosexuality was hardly progressive’ (2011: 130). Still, women and gay liberation movements were impacted by the revolutionary spirit of 1968 and gained momentum in the 1970s.

5. Cross-class thought and action in 1968 were also exposed as a myth in the autosociobiographical writings of Annie Ernaux (*Les années*; 2008) and Didier Eribon (*Retour à Reims*; 2009).

The End of the Student Protests in 1968

As Barrault understood the revolutionists' demands for cultural democratisation and socio-political change in France, he did not strictly oppose the occupation of his theatre. Instead he observed the happenings, ensured that the protestors did not cause any harm to the theatre equipment, and even gave the oft-cited and fatal speech, in which he radically declared 'Barrault est mort'. His symbolic death should represent the end of a bourgeois theatre, while there remains 'un homme vivant' who intends to actively support the political activist movement (Loyer 2010: 189). In view of the increasing chaos at the Odéon, Barrault decided to rescue important documents like reports and accounts, prompt books, and video recordings of performances, paintings and busts, furnishings and costumes, which he then stored in an empty apartment in Paris (Rauch-Lepage 1994: 81).

On 19 May, Francis Raison was informed of the government's intention to evacuate the Odéon. President Charles de Gaulle had returned from Romania and spoke the famous words, 'Réforme, oui; chienlit, non' ('Reform, yes; chaos, no') (quoted in Raison 1994: 61). On 22 May, Jean-Louis Barrault disobeyed the official command to cut off the electricity and telephone at the Odéon. In further consequence, the cultural minister André Malraux dismissed Barrault due to his cooperation with the student radicals.

According to the historian Marie-Ange Rauch, anti-authoritarian protest movements naturally develop until that point when the actual *comité d'action* is incapable to act and the occupation becomes wild, which also explains the serious damages to the theatre interior (Sorbier 2021:

05:10). After the first days, only a few leading figures of the Odéon occupation remained at the theatre. Lebel, Cohn-Bendit, Beck, and Malina had already left to pursue other plans, e.g., attending the rehearsals for the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* at the Festival d'Avignon. Thus, '[b]eginning with the second week of the occupation, the Odéon became a shelter for the capital's nomadic population. By June, waifs, tramps, and starvelings were there in force' (Brown 1980: 447). Outcasts of society inhabited the Odéon, while the revolutionists had apparently lost interest and abandoned their provisional forum for political debates. As a consequence, the occupation had lost its symbolic value in the last weeks. 'I do not believe that the student organization would have defended the last occupants', Rauch argues, 'When an occupation is no longer directed by the people who have initially launched it, then it gradually loses its meaning' (quoted in Sorbier 2021: 08:05).

On 14 June, the Théâtre Odéon and the Sorbonne University were forcefully evacuated by the police. After one month of occupation, the theatre building was severely damaged, as windows and mirrors were shattered, empty alcohol bottles had been discarded everywhere, and cigarette burns had caused holes in the cushions. Francis Raison describes the devastation of the theatre's interior: 'Inside, the sight is more than appalling: the doors of the costume store have been smashed down; the costumes have been torn, trampled, filled with rubbish and even excrement; in the hall the seats are broken; everywhere there is a foul odour; all objects of value are gone' (Raison 1994: 64). On 30 May 1968, Charles de Gaulle dissolved the national assembly and announced new elections. Simultaneously, the Prime Minister Georges Pompidou managed to calm the workers' protests by reducing the work week from forty-three to forty hours, raising the minimum wage by 35%, and decreasing the retirement age. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands publicly expressed their sympathy for de Gaulle and Pompidou on the Champs-Élysées (Veiel 2018: para. 9).

In the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* Amanda Bahr-Evola describes the end of the May Revolution in France as follows, ‘The momentum for the protesters was gone with the end of the strike and De Gaulle’s assumption of control, and the movement simply faded out of apathy, factional infighting within the New Left protesters, and an overall sense of futility’ (2007: 921). With regard to the Odéon occupation, Jean Genet criticises that the verbal orgy and utopian visions never ventured beyond the theatre walls. ‘True revolutionaries’, he claimed, ‘would have occupied law-courts, prisons, radio-stations’ (Bredeson 2011: 310).

Some argue that the revolutionary fervour of 1968 expired without lasting impact, yet the May events have marked a caesura in Europe’s cultural memory and have inspired a variety of political, social, and cultural movements. The field of theatre, for instance, saw a politicisation in the daily practice and the theoretical debate; artists increasingly reflected on the social function of cultural institutions (Jurt 2009: 71). Hierarchical structures were partly dissolved in order to pave the way for so-called ‘créations collectives’. French acting companies that originated at this time and operated on this principle include the Aquarium, the Salamandre, and the Théâtre du Soleil (Jackson et al. 2011: 301).

In May 1968, the Odéon was perceived as an official theatre of the Fifth Republic, an important public institution under cultural minister André Malraux and President Charles de Gaulle. Marie-Ange Rauch doubts that the 2021 occupation had the same symbolic weight, as the Odéon does not represent Macron’s government, whereupon she speaks of an ‘ignorance of the real historical links of this theater with the protest movements’ (Sorbier 2021: 03:10). Stéphane Braunschweig, Artistic Director of the Odéon since January 2016, does not understand the choice of venue either: ‘I am a theatre director. I do not represent the government.’ (interview with the author, 14 September 2021).⁶ By contrast, Karine Huet, General Secretary of Snam-CGT (Union Nationale

des Syndicats d’Artistes Musiciens) and representative of the Odéon occupation in 2021, brings up the argument of sustaining a memory of protest in times of need, with the Odéon as a continuously contested space. The theatre was chosen for the occupation, because it represents a ‘public theatre’ and ‘direct link to the cultural ministry’, Huet emphasises (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). Marc Slyper, who partook in the Odéon occupations of 1968 and 2021, remarks, ‘[t]his theatre permits us to give those a voice who are not heard otherwise’ (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). In this regard, the memory of the Odéon having been converted into a public forum with ‘spectacular heated debates about the creation of a new society’ (Jouve 2018: abstract) still resonates in the public memory.

Facing the Coronavirus Pandemic

In 2020 and 2021, safety and hygiene measures to combat a spread of Covid-19 gave the performing arts sector a particularly hard time. Theatres, concert halls, cinemas, and music venues had to close repeatedly and were left in uncertainty regarding when and under what conditions they would be permitted to welcome an audience again. In France, as in all other European countries, the mandatory regulations varied from one lockdown to the next: from March to May 2020, French citizens were only allowed to leave home for work purposes when it was impossible to do the job from home, for the purchase of food and everyday essentials, for medical appointments that could not be postponed, and to help a person in need.

← 6. All interviews were conducted in French. The direct quotations in this article have been translated into English by the author.

'Occupons ! Occupons ! Occupons !'

On Easter Monday, 13 April 2020, the French President publicly announced the extension of the nation-wide curfew until 11 May and the annulment of all major festivals and events with a large audience until mid-July. In a radio report broadcast by *France Culture* two days later, Françoise Benhamou, specialist in cultural economy and a professor at the Université Paris XIII, recalled that the cultural sector in France accounted for 2.5% of the GDP and employed 2.2% of the working population. Around two hundred and seventy-five thousand were registered as *intermittents du spectacle*, i.e. cultural part-time workers, and were now lacking the obligatory hours on stage or behind the scenes.⁷ Benhamou doubted whether the immense loss could be entirely compensated and feared that several theatre companies would go bankrupt (Erner 2020). On 6 May 2020, Emmanuel Macron announced an *année blanche* for all *intermittents du spectacle* and guaranteed an unconditional payment of their unemployment benefits until the end of August 2021 (Guilloux 2020: para. 5).

After a relaxation in the summer months of 2020, which permitted performances conforming to coronavirus requirements (e.g., face masks, reduced seating capacity, regular ventilation, and disinfection), the falling temperatures of autumn were accompanied by a second wave of infections. A renewed lockdown starting on 28 October 2020 obliged cultural institutions to close and again everybody working in the performing arts sector was either at a standstill or chose digital alternatives.

The new year started with demonstrations in various French cities fighting for the opening of cultural venues. Protestors claimed that performing arts are vital in stimulating creativity, fostering cultural exchange and connectivity, which is especially needed in times of increased social isolation and cannot be replaced by online alternatives.

On 4 March 2021, the artists' union CGT Spectacle called out for occupations of cultural institutions all over the country. 'We explicitly chose this date, as it marks an important anniversary', explains Karine Huet, General Secretary of Snam-CGT, 'In 2020, this was the first day when artists and technicians were prohibited to pursue their profession due to the pandemic, followed by the first lockdown on 17 March' (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). While the May Revolution of 1968 radically questioned state power and envisioned a utopian society, the activists of 2021 focused on more specific demands like the withdrawal of the planned unemployment reform and a prolongation of the *année blanche*. 'Yet, our fight against precarity and impoverishment also tackles more fundamental questions of the social system in general', Marc Slyper adds (interview with the author, 6 July 2021).

Stéphane Braunschweig describes three phases of the 2021 occupation: in the first weeks, he insisted on proceeding with the rehearsals of Christophe Honoré's production *Le Ciel de Nantes* (*The Sky over Nantes*) as planned. Only on Saturday, 6 March, the protestors also seized the stage to 'demonstrate that they were ready to prevent the rehearsals if necessary' (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). The fragile balance due to conflicting interests lasted until the rehearsals had ended in April and the theatre ensemble left the Odéon. 'Due to Covid regulations the entire administration had already been

← 7. According to official regulations, *intermittents* have to prove altogether 507 hours on stage or behind the scenes within twelve subsequent months in order to be granted unemployment benefits, which thus finance their time conceptualising, planning, and rehearsing performances.

transferred to home office before the occupation,' Braunschweig confirms (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). Thus, in the second phase, the protestors were almost alone in the empty theatre, which deprived them of their power to exert pressure on political authorities. The situation, then, radically changed when Emmanuel Macron announced the reopening of cultural institutions with the end of the coronavirus lockdown on 19 May 2021, which led to a third phase marked by conflicts and disputes.

Every day, the protestors held general assemblies on the large square in front of the Odéon, as they were not permitted to host public discussions indoors due to sanitary reasons. The theatrical set-up on the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon gave symbolic weight to their collective protest actions. During the so-called *Opération Flightcases* on 23 April (Occupation Odéon 2021b) more than fifty performers beat a rhythm on flightcases arranged in a triangle, while an opera singer standing on a small podium in their midst accompanied the steadily accelerating drumbeats with her strong and clear voice. The mighty rhythm of the drumbeats, shared patterns of movement, symbolic gestures like clenched fists, and colour-coded clothing of the performers strengthened feelings of group affiliation and solidarity. The carefully orchestrated dramaturgy of silence, vocalisation, and rhythm of the performance framed the public declaration of the protestors' demands, read aloud from the balustrade of the theatre.

While all protestors wore sanitary face masks, some were additionally costumed to display their profession, e.g., by wearing a red nose or a clown's hat. Apart from these visual identifiers, several spectators in the background held up white cardboard signs stating their regular profession which they were currently prevented from pursuing, e.g., 'Comédien', 'Régisseuse', 'Guide Conférencier', and 'Chanteur'. With the progressing pandemic and repeated lockdowns permitting only

'system-relevant employees' to leave their home, these professions were pushed to the oblivion of the private realm. The public display of these visual signs and symbolic accessories raised awareness of the existence and relevance of artistic professions.

The performance was replicated digitally and shared across social media networks to reach a global audience and to increase the pressure on political authorities. Global media technologies not only permit dissemination of collective protest actions, but also create an alternative, participatory space. Online attendees had the ability to react by posting comments and engaging in discussions with other spectators.

Reframing the Legacy of a Protest in the Twenty-First Century

While the Odéon occupation of 1968 coincided with the time of mass media modernisation and the rise of television, protestors of the twenty-first century use online tools and social networks to disseminate messages, mobilise large groups, and organise collective actions. In return, offline actions are recorded, framed, edited, and displayed on the internet to expand the scope of public attention. The 2021 occupation launched a website, Facebook page, and YouTube channel to reach the general public and communicate their demands.

The YouTube channel *Occupation Odéon* counts more than one hundred and sixty video uploads since March 2021: recorded protest actions and artistic interventions in front of the theatre, music videos, panel discussions, live Q&A sessions, and explanations on the legal situation of French cultural workers during Covid-19. The creation and dissemination of accessible resources to communicate political demands



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in 2021
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has become imperative to attract media attention and to shape the public opinion. In the series *Allô, Odéon?*, the protestors responded via livestream to questions of interested spectators and reported their experiences at the occupied theatre. The interplay of online and offline protest practices contributes to the affective and material occupation of virtual and physical spaces. Text-based communication, e.g., chat discussions during live-streamed videos, gains in spatial and temporal density, concreteness, and corporality, as soon as protest practices are transferred to the streets (Hamm 2006: 78). The video collection in the section *Ça se passe aux agoras (That happens at the agoras)* displays either talks (*Paroles d'agoras*) or performative acts (*Agor'art*) organised in front of the theatre building. The latter includes recitations of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 66*, extracts of the musical *Les Misérables*, concerts and jam sessions, contemporary dance choreographies, orchestral music, and physical performances.

Music videos were also produced to communicate the protestors' demands. Under the title, *En colère et déters (Angry and determined)*, a pianist strikes up a peppy song, when about twenty-five protestors assembled in a columned hall of the Odéon join in (Occupation Odéon 2021a). Accompanied by an accordion, tambourine, and contrabass, the catchy melody unfolds and the chorus line goes, 'Occupons, occupons partout où nous pouvons. Occupez, occupez partout où vous pouvez' ('Occupy, occupy wherever we can. Occupy, occupy wherever you can'). All performers dancing and singing to the lively rhythm wear sanitary face masks to also communicate that the current pandemic and protective measures are taken seriously. Gwennaël Hertling confirms, 'We managed to respect all the regulations and did not have one single case of Covid-19 among the occupants within the two and a half months.' (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). Even a ventriloquist's dummy singing the chorus line is equipped with a face mask.

The music video also shows a female statue in the Théâtre Odéon wearing a yellow reflective vest in allusion to the *gilet jaune* protest movement. This grassroots protest movement had neither a trade union nor political party behind it, but was instigated by the totality of working people expressing their dissatisfaction via the internet. After online petitions against the planned fuel tax rise had sprung up on social media networks, 17 November 2018 saw the first offline demonstrations attended by two hundred and eighty thousand people from all over France. What had started as a protest against the fuel tax rise hitting hardest the French lower classes living in rural areas, soon became a wider anti-government movement to express dissatisfaction with the economic programme under Macron's presidency. Images of high-visibility jackets, encampments on roundabouts, and violent protests spread around the globe. The police blamed extreme left- and right-wing rioters for infiltrating the peaceful demonstrations and inciting violent fights, which had led to multiple arrests and injuries. After a long silence on behalf of the Government, Macron addressed the protestors in a televised speech on 10 December 2018, showed understanding for their concerns, and promised a minimum wage rise as well as tax concessions. Until today, the *gilet jaune* movement has made it their continuous goal to detect and expose profound social injustices.

Likewise, the Occupation Odéon expanded their catalogue of demands, as they did not exclusively focus on the pandemic's impact on artistic professions by demanding a prolongation of the *année blanche*, but also fought for more equality in the French social security system in general. The above-cited video shows how protestors attach large white banners on the building saying 'Expiations des Crimes Capital' ('Atonement for financial crimes'). Others distribute flyers and invite pedestrians to so-called 'Vendredis de Colère' ('Fridays of Wrath') to protest against the announced unemployment reform.

Reopening the Theatres

The approaching end of the coronavirus lockdown on 19 May 2021 led to a heated debate: the cultural minister Roselyne Bachelot emphasised that the reopening of all cultural venues would be incompatible with the ongoing occupations. Stéphane Braunschweig shared her opinion and announced the cancellation of all scheduled performances until the end of the occupation. By contrast, Karine Huet remarked that the protest movement would not prevent any performances, as all necessary measures to co-exist had been taken. Marc Slyper added that the occupants had only planned to distribute flyers at the theatre entrance. They did not intend to disturb the performance or meet with the audience afterwards (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). By contrast, Stéphane Braunschweig reports having suggested a compromise: ‘You occupy the theatre during the day until two hours before the performance starts. Then you leave and return the next morning’ (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). This suggestion was rejected by the activists, as it robbed the movement of their public presence and political pressure.

In a video uploaded on 20 May 2021, the protestors expressed that the Odéon occupation did not and should not prevent the reopening of the theatre (Occupation Odéon 2021c). While a calm female voice greets future theatre visitors and rationally explains the protestors’ motives, the camera slowly moves from the entrance hall, mounts the marble staircase, crosses the buffet area with all chairs neatly arranged, follows a hallway and enters the central box, which permits a majestic view on the illuminated theatre hall. Not one single person is shown. In contrast to other protest videos depicting clenched fists and shouts in unison, this video portrays a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Only some orderly piled flyers and leaflets, banners attached to the walls, and the yellow vest decorating the marble statue silently remind of the occupation.

The calm voice ends her monologue with the words, ‘Have a good evening! And I hope to see you soon in our joint fight’. The video fades to black and displays the message, ‘Everything is ready. All that’s missing is you’.

Yet a compromise could not be found. In further consequence, the occupants decided to leave the theatre on 23 May 2021 and the Odéon took up the scheduled performances of *La ménagerie de verre* (*The Glass Menagerie*), directed by Ivo van Hove, with Isabelle Huppert in the leading role.

‘The First Stage of Any Revolution Is Always Theatrical’

Baz Kershaw argues that protests have become ‘increasingly theatricalized’ (1997: 255). In particular, he considers ‘the dramaturgy of protest events’ to be ‘an effective key to an understanding of major socio-political change in the late twentieth century’ (ibid.: 257). Demands are not just communicated verbally, but displayed in public via so-called ‘repertoires of collective action’, which the American sociologist Charles Tilly defines as a whole set of means shared by social actors with common interests: ‘the repertoire in question resembles that of *commedia dell’arte* or jazz more than that of a strictly classical ensemble: people know the general rules of performance more or less well and vary the performance to meet the purpose at hand’ (1986: 390). Such repertoires include boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, pamphleteering, marches, and blockades. The theatrical metaphor alludes to learned scripts and scenarios, combined with the spontaneity and improvisation of people’s interactions in protest movements. Similar to the long history of theatre traditions tracing an evolution of acting and viewing habits, such ‘repertoires of collective action’ also draw on interaction rituals and performative codes of previous political struggles.

The 2021 occupation took up protest repertoires of May 68, e.g., by organising marches and sit-ins in public, orchestrating speeches of union representatives, raising red and black flags, putting up banners and posters, and distributing leaflets. Symbolic elements like the iconic representation of the clenched fist often displayed on posters of 1968 were reused fifty years later. Yet differences are noticeable with regard to the significance of the occupied space, the audience/performer dichotomy, ways of communication, media presence, and the use of costumes.

The chaotic usurpation of the theatre interior in 1968 contrasts with the orchestrated dramaturgy of protest actions on the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon in 2021. The student protests of 1968 converted the Théâtre Odéon into a liminal space situated 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial' (V. Turner 1969: 95). The anthropologist Victor Turner claims that 'in liminality, new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted' (1977: 40). During its occupation the 'bourgeois theatre' with restricted accessibility and a code of conduct was transformed into a testing field for alternative political systems and a prototype of a new society. Jean-Jacques Lebel declared, 'the first stage of any revolution, is always theatrical. [...] The May uprising was theatrical in that it was a gigantic fiesta, a revelatory and sensuous explosion outside the "normal" pattern of politics' (1998: 180). The *enragés* revolted against the restrictive social order, bourgeois codes of conduct, and the conservative politics under Charles de Gaulle by publicly enacting an alternative mode of living, seizing power over their own body and voice.

In 2021, only forty-two protestors were permitted to occupy the theatre interiors due to Covid-19 and consequent safety measures.⁸ Therefore, the protest space was transferred to the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon and the impressive theatre architecture became the scenery

of the orchestrated events and speeches. The demands were oftentimes read by representatives from atop the balustrade, while performers and spectators assembled on the forecourt. The elevated positioning of the union representatives accentuates that a community on ground level — united in the shared rhythm and movement of the framing performance — carries and supports the verbally transmitted demands from above. The vertical spatial arrangement communicates a paradoxical separation between union representatives residing in the Odéon and the general public joining from the outside.

The occupants of May 68 tried not only to theoretically demand a democratisation of culture, but also to experiment with and implement a horizontal structure within the newly established liminal space. In the theatre hall, hierarchies were levelled, as revolutionists spoke from the stage, the boxes, and the floor. According to Kate Bredeson, 'lights illuminated the audience seating galleries, so people were visible all around the theater' (2018: 39) Judith Malina remembers, '[T]here was talk, talk, talk — revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak.' (quoted in Pellerin 2018: E3). Communication was non-directional and circular, as 'everybody' was allowed to join the provisional forum and to give a speech.⁹

← 8. All four interview partners — Stéphane Braunschweig, Artistic Director of the Odéon, as well as the three representatives of the occupation, Karine Huet, Gwennaël Hertling, and Marc Slyper — confirmed the difficulties of negotiating and finding compromises. In the end, the theatre was occupied by forty-two representatives of the protest movement. Stéphane Braunschweig accepted a maximum of ten people with valid Covid tests changing shifts per day to minimise the risk of infection, but pointed out that the theatre staff did not control the entrance. By contrast, the protestors criticised the lack of cooperation and, thus, decided to relocate their protest action to the public square in front of the theatre.

9. As noted above, 'everybody' mostly included white male upper-class students, while minorities participated on the fringes, in the background, or outside the movement.

Fifty years later, the development of digital technology permits global dissemination of recorded protest actions, facilitates networking of like-minded individuals, noticeably expands the sphere of influence, and increases the pressure exerted on political authorities. The knowledge that collective action is livestreamed or recorded and, thus, perceived from a different perspective (e.g., aerial shots by drones) impacts the dramaturgical nature of public mass protest. Thus, protest actions on the Place de l'Odéon were well orchestrated to demonstrate unity and power. The performers join in a rhythm of drumbeats and claps, shared patterns of movement, and speaking choirs, which strengthens the community spirit and transmits the impression of a cohesive assembly ready to fight for their goal(s). According to media scientist Kathrin Fahlenbrach, the individual participants experience their 'personal identity' merging in a 'collective protest identity' due to their intense physical and emotional involvement (2009: 101). The reciprocal perception of the 'Other' as a member of a collective unity strengthens their determination to act. In *Opération Flightcases* on 23 April 2021, the acoustic demonstration pauses for the announcement of the protesters' demands, which are then read by a union representative on the balustrade (Occupation Odéon 2021b).

The use of accessories and costumes in the protest actions of 2021 served the purpose to display artistic professions that have vanished into oblivion with the progressing pandemic. While 'system-relevant employees' were permitted to leave their home during the lockdown, artists were confronted with the closure of cultural institutions and were robbed of their offline connection to the audience. In the 2021 protest actions, the public display of symbolic accessories like the red nose should raise awareness of the existence and relevance of artistic professions. During the occupation of 1968, the use of costumes had a different significance: 'Girls adorned themselves with all the bracelets and diadems in the prop store, so that the disaffected theater was

soon swarming with a Mardi Gras crowd got up in strange disguises. Any swatch of black or red material — including the stage curtain — was requisitioned for the fabrication of flags [...] The costume ball included a constabulary which had armed itself with helmets, swords, and pikes — these, too, looted from the prop store' (Brown 1980: 447).

The protestors repurposed the theatre inventory, stage props, and costumes of the Odéon, which gave the occupation a carnivalesque character. Richard Schechner draws a connection between revolutions and the carnival, as they both 'propose a free space to satisfy desires, [...] a new time to enact social relations more freely' (1993: 47). Participants are permitted to 'mask and costume or act in ways that are "not me." These behaviors are almost always excessive relative to ordinary life' (ibid.). According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), the carnival represents a time when all rules and regulations are suspended. Yet, social hierarchies are reinforced as soon as the festivities have ended. The briefly lived utopia at the Odéon manifested an anti-society to the existing order and a counter-culture to the bourgeois system.

In 2021, the Odéon occupation also repurposed the theatre interior and established a protest site 'betwixt and between', but instead of a carnivalesque inversion of the everyday the protestors under the lead of CGT Spectacle defined precise goals, set up a schedule, mapped out strategies, orchestrated protest actions outdoors, and transmitted their demands via offline and online channels. In 1968, by contrast, leading figures like Lebel, Cohn-Bendit, Beck, and Malina had already abandoned the Odéon after the initial rush to pursue other plans and left the occupation to a movement without a lead.

Baz Kershaw is cautious when associating protest movements with notions of carnival, as one should discriminate between 'events which change and those which reinforce existing social orders', and he views

the purpose of contemporary protest in achieving ‘efficacy by inventing unprecedented symbolic-real configurations’ (1997: 266). While revolutions break open rigid social structures and do not have a foreseeable end, the carnival operates within a strictly defined time and place; the status quo is restored after the liminal phase of reversed social hierarchies has come to an end. The chaotic usurpation of the Odéon in 1968 was evacuated by the police, after leading figures had already lost interest and directed their attention to different projects, whereas the much more organised occupation in 2021 argued for a co-existence with recommencing theatre productions, did not come to a compromise, and then decided to peacefully leave the public venue.

The May Revolution of 1968 started as a series of student protests which criticised the centralistic structure and hierarchical administration of universities, the restrictive academic practices, and absent dialogue on pressing social issues. On 13 May, the students were joined by the labour unions who fought against the exploitation of the work force and the economic imbalance among the French population. The occupation of universities and factories, nation-wide strikes, street fights, and demonstrations paralysed the entire country. Intellectuals and artists expressed their solidarity with the striking students and workers, located their demands in an even larger context, and discussed courageous visions of a new society.

The occupation of the Théâtre Odéon on 15 May 1968 marked a briefly lived utopia amidst this tumultuous atmosphere. Perceived as an institution of state power and a citadel of bourgeois culture, the Odéon was transformed into an open-access forum for political debates, a democratic assembly granting ‘everybody’, i.e. mostly white male upper-class students, the right to speak — from the stage, the boxes, and the floor. The revolutionary talk had become performance, the substance of the political movement.

On 16 May 1968, a Parisian journalist reported, ‘At the Odéon tonight [...] the show is in the theatre. A show without a director, without a playwright, without an usher, but with 3000 actors: the occupants of the orchestra, the dressing room, and even the stage. But those who have taken the Odéon [...] are not here to stage a play. They talk’ (Janin 1968b: 02:05). Instead of being subjected to the words, demands, and orders of those in power, students and workers experienced the freedom to rise and speak in public. Yet, as Jean Genet put it, the Odéon

saw ‘a circular movement of revolutionary speeches’ which ‘never left the theatre’ (quoted in Bredeson 2011: 310).

Fifty years later, the theatre interiors were occupied by forty-two protestors only, due to hygiene and safety reasons. The activists, therefore, decided to (1) stage protest actions on the public square in front of the theatre and to (2) disseminate recorded messages via online platforms and social media networks. The interplay of online and offline protest practices permits reaching a broader audience, to occupy not only physical, but also virtual social spaces, and to increase pressure on political authorities.

With its long history of occupations — in 1968, 1992, and 2016 — the Odéon was once again chosen as a ‘public theatre’, a ‘direct link to the cultural ministry’ (Karine Huet), and a platform ‘to give those a voice who are not heard otherwise’ (Mark Slyper; interviews with the author, 6 July 2021). In 2021, it was primarily the symbolic significance and impressive architecture of the theatre that attracted attention, while the collective protest actions were transferred to the public forecourt and media spaces.

In contrast to the chaotic usurpation of the national theatre in 1968, the 2021 movement is characterised by an orchestrated dramaturgy of events with clearly defined objectives. Yet, there are parallels with regard to the *theatrical* practices, e.g., shared patterns of movement, *symbolic* elements, e.g., the iconic representation of a clenched fist, and the *ideological* foundation, e.g. scepticism towards political, economic, and cultural authorities. •

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