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ESSAYS
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SPECTATORSHIP
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AGATA ŁUKSZA
PIETER VERSTRAETE



**EDITORIAL
INTRODUCTION**

**AGATA ŁUKSZA
PIETER VERSTRAETE**



The past decade has seen an upsurge of protest movements all over the globe as well as scholarship on activism in diverse disciplines. Concomitant to the upward thrust of social media platforms in our daily interactions, new and re-emerging forms of collective protest have proliferated and strengthened social movements as well as civil society groups. More often than not we see that these protests have themselves born theatrical and performative aspects. They have also inspired new generations of theatre practitioners to recalibrate their own response-ability through their representations on the stage as well as through actions in public space. Whether it be reclaiming *spaces of appearance* to (inspire to) act as equals ‘in concert’ in the streets (Arendt 1958), like Standing Man in Turkey, or capitalising on the *society of the spectacle* (Debord 1967) to invoke strong affective reactions in complicit spectators at home or in the theatre, like the images of *Querdenken*’s storming of the Reichstag or its uncanny simile in Milo Rau’s *General Assembly*, theatrical and performative qualities of present-day activism often intertwine at the intersection of visibility, subjectivity, and spectatorship.

As editors of this fourth special Essays section of the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, we ask ourselves: what can a theatre and/or performative lens bring to the table to understand contemporary forms of activism? What can we learn from past forms and scholarship? What is the contribution of theatre and performance concepts to critical social and political inquiry, like in current debates of democracy, populism, environmentalism, violence, racism, sexism, social justice, etc.? What does it really mean ‘to act’, ‘to move’, or ‘be moved’? What is theatre’s or performance’s real (bio)power? How does theatre ‘assemble’ people or create spaces to carry on the memory of a movement in times of absence and repression? How do theatre and performance bypass censorship in support of an activism of the stage? Or do they contribute rather to a democracy that looks more like Plato’s vexed ‘theatrocracy’? And how do theatrical modes of spectating, framing, and referencing specific symbiologies come into play to incite citizens to re-act, to take part in solidarity, be it directly in the streets or more distant, in theatres or through our mobile devices?

This is all not that very new, of course, albeit that social media have certainly increased visibility, as well as the speed of connectivity and accessibility to knowledge that can mobilize people. From the nostalgic ‘decade of revolution’ in the 1960s up until today, tactical repertoires (Tilly 1978), scripts and scenarios (Kershaw 1997; Taylor 2003) have been drawn from earlier forms of peaceful protest and ‘guerrilla theatre’ (Davis 1966, crediting Peter Berg for coining the term). Already in the 1990s, theatre scholars like Baz Kershaw observed how most forms of contemporary protest are encroached by ‘performative considerations’ (1997: 274) and tactics, even when spontaneous, which he describes as ‘dramaturgies of protest’. He goes so far as to describe performance, particularly in the wake of 1989, as ‘central to all socio-political processes, producing a “performative society” and maintaining ‘performative democracies’ (257). The latter is defined further by Elzbieta

Matynia (2009) in a more sustainable role of activism to create urban pockets for uninhibited expressions of political agency, possibility, and positionality. According to Judith Butler, who observes collective acts of political protests since the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring in 2011, performativity is the *sine qua non* for public assemblies who call into existence a performative politics that is closely tied to the bodies of its constituent members. They particularly highlight the protesters’ precarity that operates as a ‘site of alliance’ even while such members do not otherwise have much in common with each other (Butler 2015: 27).

The history of activist forms and the performative concepts they inspired constitute one thread in this Essays section that some of the contributors have focused on. Hanna Huber makes a comparison between the occupations of the legendary Théâtre Odéon (aka Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe), a cultural symbol in Paris, in 1968 and 2021. Huber demonstrates the differing theatrical nature of the protests, their main symbols, mobilising techniques, and interweaving of aesthetics and politics, while offering perspective on the theatre’s recent occupation, which so far has not received much academic attention. Laura Budriesi delves further into the historical roots of theatricalised forms of protest, in search of a ‘semantics of activism’, by zooming into the legacy of guerrilla theatre in the 60s as an upshot of other radical and participatory theatre groups, like the Living Theatre, juxtaposing their arsenal of techniques to more recent phenomena like artivism in the 90s and smart mobs in the 2000s. She also touches on the feminist legacy in today’s antispeciesist activism in Italy.

Most of the cases analysed in this Essays section confirm Victor Turner’s long-standing thesis on the deep interdependency between social and theatrical drama, or to put it more broadly — theatrical practice — developed further by Richard Schechner (Turner 1987). Diverse examples from different times and spaces reveal how these two human social

activities interfere and fuel each other not only on the level of ideas, but, perhaps more importantly, in the field of repertoires of contention and collective action (Tilly 1983), modes of being together and assembling, and ways of constructing public space. Such connection occurs regardless of the political profile of the movement and its position in the political spectrum, whether it belongs to the right-wing, conservative, or populist realm, or it situates in the left-wing, socialist, or communist pole, whether it stems from grass-roots oppositional and anti-systemic aspirations, or it constitutes a part of hegemonic myth making by state or non-state actors. Whatever the case, public space, which becomes the site of activism, gains a liminal dimension — the way it is understood in anthropology after Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner — because a public assembly triggers a subjunctive mode which opens a possibility of self-reflection and questioning of the dominant order by revealing its contingency and arbitrariness. In this perspective, social protests emerge in response to social crises as a way of overcoming these crises and imagining new social models.

Drawing from Judith Butler, who appears to be a major influence for most recent scholarship on social and political protests, most authors in this issue acknowledge the importance of *the bodies* constituting the public assembly. The bodies are the locus of the protest performativity; however, it is no less important where the bodies gather and in what ways their presence reshapes the space they occupy (as well as in what ways this space affects the assembly). The category of space directs towards the privileged relation between theatre and protest as theatrical buildings often host the very core of the protest or constitute important links in the protest spatial network. This interdependency shows how easily the site of artistic expression, which is liminoidal by its nature, can evolve into a liminal space where social drama unravels.

Due to its spatial nature, theatre has then the potential to extend the concerns of public space and its revolutionary imaginings to the stage,

particularly when its symbols and traces in the streets have been erased by authorities. This is the case, for instance, in Turkey, where both Zeynep Uğur and Deniz Başar report from, in the wake of the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Uğur focuses on the genuine potential of alternative theatres in Istanbul to carry further the response-ability of artists who took part in ‘Gezi’ as well as in its central desire for creative ‘space making’ in the city after Henri Lefebvre’s adage of claiming the ‘right to the city’ (1968; 1996). Başar, inspired by the work of Diana Taylor, is more interested in the performative extension of repertoires of resistance contributing to what she calls ‘monuments of absence’ be it physically as urban objects or felt as tactile absences of performativities in the public sphere. In both instances, the power of collective memory and commemoration is a role that theatre and performance artists can make their own to counteract the state’s wilful forgetting and myth making around new national memories of the resistance and its aftermath.

Most of the essays published in this section relate to Kershaw’s concept of ‘dramaturgies of protest’ and, as such, challenge a ‘common sense’ assumption about the inherently chaotic and spontaneous nature of social protests. On the contrary, juxtaposed studies of different cases point to the fact that such protests unravel not unlike a theatrical performance, that is according to scripts and through established and restored repertoires of behaviour, often borrowed from the realm of theatre or other cultural performances, such as sports.

Juliana Coelho de Souza Ladeira and Julia Guimarães Mendes teamed up to discuss the many street protests of the ‘new Brazilian right’ between 2013 and 2021 in three thematic cycles following the protests’ main symbols (‘Patria’, ‘God’, and ‘Guns’), thereby discerning different theatrical strategies used in these protests. One such theatricalised moment is when the impeachment process of President Dilma Rousseff in the Chamber of Deputies in 2016 followed all the scripts of a televised

World Cup final, identifying the protesters as the representation of the crowd or even, ‘the people’ through what Kershaw (1997) would call the ‘synecdoche character of protests’, in which a part of the social (in this case the protestors) are made to stand for the whole, the society at large.

A similar tactic is discussed by Leon Gabriel who describes the 2020 images of protesters in Germany’s conspiracy-prone and QAnon-like *Querdenken* movement storming the Reichstag building, the seat of the German Parliament, in their claim to be a ‘true uprising’ of ‘the people’ as a whole who were insurrecting against the allegedly corrupt elites. While comparing the images to Milo Rau’s *General Assembly* in 2017, which was in itself a re-enactment of the storming of the Russian Tsar’s Winter Palace in 1917, Gabriel problematises theatre’s simplistic equation of being a place of (political) assembly just because of its ability to assemble, and therefore automatically being imbued with the task to be an environment for testing out democracy. He refers to Plato’s critical notion of ‘theatrocracy’ in his *Republic*, revealing the dangers of proximity between politics and theatricalisation, thus reminding of Samuel Weber’s reading that theatricality only becomes subversive when it separates itself from the confines of the *theatron*, in short, the theatre (2004: 37).

The theatricalisation of protests that Kershaw also observed calls for questioning not only the particular framing through which the actions of individuals and groups appearing for each other in the Arendtian space of appearance can be seen, but also the spectatorship that this theatricalisation hails, *on performative terms*. Theatricality and performativity are then often more interdependent than at odds with each other. When discussing the theatrical and/or performative aspects of protest and activism, one should be cautious of an essentialist dialectics. As Rebecca Schneider (2014) points out, traditionally the category of performance used to be linked with such values as authenticity,

sincerity, and purity, and thus legitimising one’s right to act within the Habermasian public space. The same for Butler, performativity in this context is related to the possibility of appearing in public space. The insurgence of the precarious bodies and their existence within this space would be performative.

The gendered concept of theatricality, on the contrary, constituted its polar opposition and shed dark shadows on one’s public actions. To quote Schneider, ‘[t]heatricality refers to posing, feigning, appearing “as if,” miming, dissimulating, masquerading, camping, and acting. Theatricality always announces an ambivalent relationship to the real. Most often, theatricality is evident to a viewer. That which is theatrical is that which does not quite pass’ (2014: 26). This unequally valorised gendered distinction, which ideological matrix Schneider dismantles, demands further investigation in the context of social protests. The more so concerning the genealogy of the very word ‘theatricality’ which was coined to comment on the commemorations in the era of the French Revolution, Europe’s first epochal mass media event. Thus, from the very beginning, theatricality becomes ‘tinted’ with a political agenda as a propaganda tool applied in the performance of power.

According to Tracy Davis, ‘theatricality is neither an aesthetic effect nor a relationship of theatre to lived reality, but goes beyond this clichéd polarity to address the commensurability of spectating to civil society’ (2003: 151). While the essays collected in this section do not explore this sharp division between theatricality and performativity, it remains to be answered to what degree, on the one hand, contemporary social protests have overcome this binary juxtaposition and profit from the subversive potential of theatricality recognised by Schneider and, on the other hand, to what extent theatricality is still invoked when for instance speaking about manipulative actions undertaken by masquerading agents of authoritarian rules.

The final two essays do give us some ideas of the ideological underpinnings of the theatricality and spectacle of activist images, memes, and symbols. Yingjun Wei discusses the performance of state power in China through what she calls a gendered ‘disaster nationalism’ (borrowed from Zhang 2020) in support of state-led nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism. Her case in point focuses on online strategies of objectifying female bodies and strengthening gender performativity during the Covid-19 pandemic through hashtags on the Chinese Weibo social platform and the spread of images of female health workers wearing masks like soldiers or of bald-headed nurses. Quite contrary to the above ‘clichéd polarity’, Wei counterposes the state-controlled gender performativity with Butler’s necessary severing of the ‘theater of legitimacy’ (2015: 85) which she finds in the performative feminist resistance of *Jiangshanjiao* that calls into question the legitimacy of this performativity by the state apparatus, targeting ‘the regulation of the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution’ (ibid.).

Rebecca Hillman closes the Essays section in homage to Kershaw, following his proposal to deliver ‘a kind of historical relief map of changing civil desire’ in a climate of incumbent radical social and political change with the emergence of Corbynism in the UK, which yielded a potential to ‘disrupt socio-political expectations and produce new kinds of public discourse’ concerning collective power, socialism, and communism, specifically (1997: 256–7). Hillman’s argument revolves around contemporary reclamations of symbols and practices associated historically with socialism and communism. She particularly looks at the use of red flags in a 2016 performance of *Love on the Dole* by Salford Community Theatre and gives a more personal account of her engagement in a group called ‘the red bloc’ with which they choreographed in 2015 a disciplined bloc of marching people. Her insider’s perspective gives an insight into the choreographies of protest by a new generation of activists taking the baton where previous generations may have left it.

With that, our investigations into Activism and Spectatorship come full circle. The present essays observe a wide array of perspectives, on either side of the political spectrum and in different corners of the globe. As editors of this issue, we hope that it may open new insights into the past and present of activist forms, the relevance of theatre and performance scholarship in this field of study, and that it may inspire many scholarly as well as political debates. In true Delacroix style, we wave the flag at you. ●

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