The political scene and the dramatic stage at the time of the French Revolution

I wrote nine research papers which were published in academic journals or in conference proceedings. Five other papers that I wrote during those 3 years are still to be published.

I also made nine presentations in front of various academic audiences: international symposiums held in France and Japan, seminars in France and Japan. Most of those lectures and texts were directly related to the project I submitted for the JSPS-grant Kakenhi, dealing with drama and oratory at the time of the French Revolution. A couple of them were dedicated to more distant topics, as for example the book I wrote on the ukiyo-e master Hokusai.

Research fields: Humanities

Keywords: 18th century, France, Drama, Oratory
1. Previous research and pathways to the Kakenhi project

This project came as a continuation of a PhD dissertation defended at the Universite Paris-8 in 2005. It was dealing with political speeches and parliamentary debates at the time of the French Revolution, covered from a rhetorical point of view. My researches were focused on the theatricality which can be found in this peculiar sort of real drama. After writing this PhD, I extended my reflection on other subject matters related to the image of this great historical and political event conveyed by the literature (drama, novels, all kinds of fictions) and the historiography, from the 19th century onwards. In doing so, I got led to take a closer view at the political dramas of that era. I thus figured out the next step of my researches should consist taking a reverse angle on the subject matter: instead of looking for the theatricality of politics, to survey and highlight the reflections of parliamentary politics (the so-called political scene) on the drama stage and theater plays of that time.

It has often been asserted that the theater plays written and performed during the decade of the French Revolution (1789-1799), however numerous they were, whatever passions they may have aroused in their audience, were of very poor aesthetic interest. The peculiar features of the dramatic stage at the time of the Revolution didn’t match the common views about the history of theater in France. This revolutionary drama, arisen amid massive social turmoil, full of allusions to the debates of the day, strongly tied to the political issues at stake, has somewhat paradoxically been denied to have shown any tendency toward a revolution in the dramatic art it has devised. It has been deemed revolutionary in the very narrow respect of political propaganda, but by no means revolutionary as far as aesthetics was concerned: a mere and stodgy imitation of the classical canon established in the 17th century, combined with a raucous eulogy-or depreciation-of ideas promoted by the newly established authorities, those plays were regarded as out of touch with a new sensibility and historical consciousness wrought by the Revolution.

After prevailing for long decades, this statement has come to fade: like other fields in the artistic and cultural productions of the time (oratory and literature), theater has benefited from the revival of revolutionary studies brought about by the Bicentennial of the French Revolution celebrated in 1989. As a consequence, the angle from which the theater of the French Revolution has been put under scrutiny has chiefly been focused on its ideological content and its symbolic functions in the apparatus of civic festivals and ritual events designed to frame the new body politic, leaving the specific kind of dramatic art devised in those yrs unquestioned. A closer look at it might well trace the road for further investigations.

2. Purpose of the project

The essential reason why the dramatic art so adequately fits in with the dynamics of revolutionary events lies in the critical importance of speech acts on both scenes, the political one and the dramatic one: oratory skills were sought for with enthusiastic faith as the most efficient tool to achieve the regeneration of society. When it comes to the demiurgic powers of speech, there are only two realms in which they can unfold: religion and the theater, both of them being endowed with performative properties: on the stage as well from the pulpit, to speak is to create, to utter words is to bring things into existence.

The French Revolution played it both ways: authorities relied on the appeal of the spectacular to establish the belief in a Supreme Being designed as a synthesis of traditional Christian religiosity, philosophical reason, and moral feelings in a Rousseauist fashion; along with this officially sponsored form of worship, they also actively promoted the cult of revolutionary heroes and martyrs, in order to enhance the sacredness of the new set of republican values. In addition, it may be stated that the theater, insofar as it involves a process of representation of a fictitious character through the living presence of an actor, underlies the issues of political representation, raised by the
The controversial emergence of parliamentary form as an embodiment of the general will: the implementation of that system did not get along without a strong resistance in a country breaking up with an absolutist tradition, as the direct devolution of power to the people kept arguing over its legitimacy.

One specific side of the connection between theatricality and political speech acts remains unexplored: given the fact that parliamentary debates have often been decisive in the course of events, they were consequently to play a central part while reflected in contemporary plays. Therefore, there is a lot to learn from the way those debates were represented (or avoided) on the stage: what sort of syllogism, homology, or perhaps contradiction, are we to draw out of this encounter?

3. Method of research

I had the opportunity to rely on a substantial range of studies devoted to the interactions between the political and the theatrical spheres. However, the most noticeable examples of such investigations, such as Susan faslan’s Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution (John Hopkins University Press, 1996), and Paul Friedland’s Political Actors: Representative bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution (Cornell University Press, 2002), draw on a rather theoretical approach, still reluctant to take the dramatic art into account. French scholars have proved more easily prone to do so: Pierre Frantz, in several important articles released since the Bicentennial, along with Poirson who edited Le theatre sous la Revolution. Politique du repertoire (Desjonqueres, 2008), must be quoted as the main promoters of a thorough inquiry into this corpus.

To get deeper into the subject matter required to grasp a full knowledge of the hundreds of theater plays written during the revolutionary decade. The Kansai University Library provides a substantial insight, as it hosts a facsimile of a broad collection of 210 theater plays: the Repertoire du theatre cain. However, this thorough analysis of the theatrical corpus had to be supplemented by various and numerous other sources, such as newspapers, accounts of political assemblies, public meetings, government agencies, pamphlets, works of writers and publicists, memoirs written by actors and theatergoers. I therefore was also fortunate to rely on a rich collection of microfilms hosted by Senshu University (Ikuta Campus, Tokyo): the Collection Michel Bernstein.

The research also required a close examination of other types of documents, available in various French institutions: the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (French National Library, Paris), the Archives Nationales (Public record Office, Paris), the Bibliotheque Historique de la Ville de Paris (public library specializing in the history of the city of Paris), the library of the Comedie-Francaise (main theater of the country, established in 1680, Paris), and the documentation center housed in the Museum of the French Revolution in Vizille (South-East of France).

4. Results of the project

During the FY 2014-2015, an important part of my activities were focused on projects not directly related to the main one. In spite of this fact, they gave me the opportunity to broaden my general knowledge about interesting aspects of the topic. First, I took part to a symposium in France (Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle, June 30-July 3), dedicated to a contemporary novelist and poet, Christian Prigent (who himself attended to the symposium). Giving a speech on his use of language from a political point of view, I developed a comparison between his works and the peculiar forms of oratory arisen during the French Revolution.

Secondly, I was asked by one the main French publishers in the realm of fine arts (RMN-GP), to write a short book on the ukiyo-e master Hokusai: this book (Le Japon vu par Hokusai, album de l’exposition du Grand-Palais, September 2014) was meant to be available during a big Hokusai exhibition held at the Grand Palais (Paris) from October 2014 to January 2015. This task led me to deepen
my knowledge about theater performance and its connections with politics: in spite of obvious differences between the Japanese society under Edo era and the French society in the same epoch, the comparison can prove insightful.

But the most important task I fulfilled during this first year was the co-organization of, and the contribution to, a big symposium held at the University of Rouen (France), in March 2015, "Dramaturgies du conseil et de la deliberation": I was a member of the organization committee, I got actively involved in the invitation of the keynote speaker (the former prosecutor Marcel Lemonde, who worked for the International court in Cambodia in the 2000’s); finally, I gave a speech dealing with the core of my subject matter (published later, in October 2016), which is likely to provide the introduction chapter of the book I am currently working on.

The second year, FY 2015-2016, was filled by two big events related to the project. In May, I went to Paris for a symposium organized by a prominent scholar of Paris IV-Sorbonne University, Pierre Frantz (namely, my advisor for the HDR-or second PhD-which I am aiming at through the Kakenhi-project). The speech I gave, on a theaterplay showing the British Parliament in the time of the French Revolution, is also likely to provide a chapter of my dissertation (and hopefully my book).

In November, I organized and led a workshop during the Congress of the Japanese Society of French language and literature (SJLLF), held at Kyoto University. It was a great opportunity to start gathering the Japanese scholars working in the same field of research. After the event, I kept committed in developing such a network. I also worked on more distant topics, eventhough not irrelevant to my project. I belong to another Kakenhi project led by Patrick Rebollar (Nanzan University, Nagoya) and Tadako Ichimaru (Gakushuin University, Tokyo). I took part to a symposium they organized in June 2015 at the French National Library. The project "Mazarinades" (named after a broad corpus of political texts of mid-17th century France) provided me with an interesting opportunity to deepen my reflection about the ties between the revolutionary event and the framing of French political culture. I kept working with this perspective during the FY 2016-2017, as the Project Mazarinades led to another symposium held at the University of Tokyo (Komaba) in November. I also spent 10 days in France in June, where I had to give two speeches, dealing respectively with the oratory in a broad historical and cultural perspective, including however a focus on the French Revolution (University of Rouen), and with the French theater of the 18th century as a whole (for a seminar hosted by the Philosophy Department of the University Paris-I, Pantheon-Sorbonne).

All the speeches I have given, either in France or in Japan, have been followed by a paper I wrote, all of whom already published or to be published, in the proceedings of the symposium, or in academic journals.

5. Research works record

1) "Les hommes d’argent, l’argent dans la societe : fortune theatrale d’un type dramatique et d’une question politique (1/2 : le XVIIIe siecle)", Eric Avocat, Galli a, 56, pp. 41-50, 2017


3) "Un topos a revisiter dans les Mazarinades : le debat sur les regimes politiques", Eric Avocat, L’exploration des Mazarinades, colloque international organise par l’équipe internationale du Projet Mazarinades (JSPS - Kakenhi 2014-2017, C-26370364), sous la direction de Tadako Ichimaru (Kagawa University), Patrick Rebollar (Zurich University), Yann Sordet (Bibliotheque Mazarine), 2016

4) "Du theatre a la theatralite : la scene parlementaire et la pluralite des mondes dramaturgiques", Eric Avocat, Dramaturgies du conseil et de la deliberation, Actes du colloque organise a l’Universite de Rouen en mars 2015, publies par Xavier...
11) « Neuf acteurs en quête d’histoire : ‘åŠwA"ú–{ƒtƒ‰ƒ“ƒXŒêƒt Takase »,
drame au cœur du japonais organisé par le Departement de langue et litterature.

10) « Le théâtre de la Révolution française : entre esthétique et politique, une

9) « Le théâtre de la Révolution française : entre esthétique et politique, une

8) Argent et rapport sociaux dans le

7) « Ce que vaut la parole : la rhétorique et ses métaphores monétaires »,

6) L’argent sur la scène théâtrale

5) La pas baïonette de la justice. De

4) Les marindanes, point aveugle de la

3) Les mazarinades, point aveugle de la

2) Les mazarinades, point aveugle de la

1) Les mazarinades, point aveugle de la
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