

Applause, and then Silence

Valete et plaudite! the leading actor in Roman times would cry at the end of a performance. With time, this custom of greeting and arousing the audience to applaud, has died out, since applause has become customary. It has become a matter of convention. It is assumed that applause indicates approval, pleasure, support, sympathy. The snapping of fingers, the clapping of hands, the waving of togas, handkerchiefs or any other rag, the stamping of feet or making a noise by any other means, these variants of applause expressed the degree of satisfaction of those present. But the original spontaneity has given place to custom, to order and organisation, and the original singularity has been replaced by applause in which various, often conflicting, implications are hidden.

Applause is a greeting. Thus did the people cry to the emperor, thus were heroes welcomed, festivities commenced, significant and beloved newcomers greeted, respected individuals bidden farewell. The applause is the voice of the public. It is the transformed voice by which the public sends its message. In the theatre, applause, before the rise of the curtain, may be an expression of respect and regard for the performers, a welcome and an encouragement, but frequently it may be a sign of impatience, of a muted protest caused by delay in the performance. This slow clapping is a warning: even patience has its limits, the public must be respected and its approval earned. For this reason, stage managers hurry the actors, nervous ushers close the doors, lights are put out. If this warning shuffle is repeated, it is only a short step away from tension in the audience and, for the performer, a dangerous dissatisfaction in the auditorium. The curtain rises. One more short burst of applause, sometimes directed at the setting, and the performance begins. As a rule, the public expresses itself only at the end and the ensemble will learn only at the end of its performance whether its hidden fears were justified. Great performances break this rule, for usually - the moment the plot develops in its breadth and the performance in its quality - they are accompanied by applause 'in mid-act', applause that is usually begun by one of the more experienced members of the audience, one of those who are able both to sense the inspiration of the performance and the pulse of the

inspired public. And although such an expression of early recognition is encouraging and relaxing for the actors, still it can hinder the performance, drown a significant line with its noise or, by its frequency, even seriously disturb the planned rhythm of the performance's development. Applause during the actual performance is, above all, welcome and every better director foresees it and, with fair certainty, makes allowance for it in the total duration of the play, and the more skilful actor knows how, by dint of calculated effects, to provoke it. As regards their differing supporters, the actor and the political speaker do not, indeed, employ identical means, but they do flirt with the public's enthusiasm in a similar way. At times, however, an outburst of applause in the middle of a performance is completely unexpected and disturbing. Not one concert, organised for educative or celebratory reasons, has had the end of each movement interrupted by enthusiastic applause. From that moment, the performers know with whom they have to deal. Not understanding the performance is not far removed from ignorance, at least not in its outward manifestations, but those who do not understand are far more cautious than the well-meaning ignoramus and accompany the performance with pious dullness and courteous approval. They do not produce the burst of applause in the wrong place. Such a burst of unexpected and undesired 'enthusiasm', on the part of a critically inclined public, reveals the negative connotations of applause: their frequency and arrogant merriment expresses an ironic attitude of the public towards dilettantes, its stubborn noise demands an end to the performance, the chaotic, short applause at the end of a performance expresses derision, and the intentional and uninterrupted chanting during the whole performance, which hinders the acting of an unwanted performer or of some speaker, reveals, in a positive form, the negative content and the full capacity of the subversive nature of applause. In their desire to stop such unpleasant reactions and to avoid the indifference of the audience, the actors themselves have invented yet another form of applause, which is far from a positive symptom. This refers to the ordered, directed applause. Known from ancient times, this paid and organised expression of approval has given birth to a doubt of the justification and sincerity of applause. The greater the influence of unofficial leaders and chorus-masters (*choragus*) in the audience, the greater the number of bribable applauders (*claque*), the more it appeared necessary to remove applause from the theatre and the church. Solemnity, dignity and respect drove out indiscipline and

cheering, but, in this way spontaneity is strangled as well as every justified expression of the audience's enthusiasm. Indeed, only for a short time. The howling of the arena and the vociferous support of the street, is once again articulated in the theatre by appropriate applause. Through applause, the public apprises the actors of its attitude towards the performance.

All forms of literary reviews of an artistic work, between the lines, include applause. Both, basically, present a desire for assessment, only in applause directness dominates, while, in a review, the intervention comes with a critical distancing. But while the critic tends, or tries, to present himself as the objective assessor, the audience openly expresses its personal attitude. This unconcealed sincerity traditionally belonged to the gallery, which was wont to shock those in the privileged seats who, with a measured, lukewarm patting of one palm on another, demonstrated their social and intellectual superiority. What is important is who applauds and how. This rule has been affirmed many time and in many ways. "Is the prince clapping?" Mozart enquired anxiously. He knew that the success of his opera depended on the prince's will, for he knew that all respectable and reasonable applauders would follow the prince's example, that their restraint would become delight if the prince was delighted, for he knew and had seen so many times, that all applause in the prince's presence was, after all, directed towards the prince himself. Here applause is not an expression of taste, but a manner of servile acclamation in which the lack of independence on the part of the subject is reflected. Just this being tied to a codex of defined behaviour makes it that, in all public life, a distinction is made between desirable and undesirable, welcome and impermissible applause, and, in such a differentiation, applause is divided into the 'cultured' and 'uncultured', which is simply a euphemism for the broad spectrum of social (un)acceptability. Social convention or even explicit pressure sometimes forces the public to restrain from any support of some cultural event which scandalises the public, by which the few, isolated sympathisers are categorised into outcasts and trouble-making eccentrics. Such lone applauders may sometimes be heard even in the theatre. Their destructive activity is often the target for sneers, contempt and condemnation, yet it is an integral part of theatre mythology. When, in situations of extreme repression, not even this lone voice dare express itself, the sympathising public resorts to a form of codified applause, in which, by gesture

or attitude, it expresses its support of the ostracised work. Fortunately, such situations are relatively infrequent. Another form of silence and another, different, applause conceals in itself a far greater threat and trouble.

Applause is a sign of participation. When it exceeds the forms of courtesy, it becomes in, its spontaneous manifestation, a synonym for joy and enthusiasm. History, however, also recalls many examples of 'organised' expressions of approval, from those in which applause, as a sign of loyalty to a despot, continues to a point of utter exhaustion, since nobody dares to be the first to stop applauding, which is mentioned by Solzhenytsin, to those when applause serves to affirm support for every kind of madness, where applause has become an expression of cruelty, a perverted expression of a civilised form which has, quite appropriately, served its opposite - barbarity which is implicit in it. It is possible that such a situation has, to some extent, laid the way open to artistic triviality and all types of kitsch, though no parallel with an artistic production, no matter how monstrous and cheap, may be entirely justified. For this reason, the concept of 'theatre applause' must be distinguished from every other manifestation of public approval, for neither is it caused by the same, nor has it arisen from the same motives, and in no way expresses the same thing. The actors accept applause as a merited award, ovations as an outpouring of admiration from a grateful public. For that ending, which in dramatic literature is functionally denoted by the word 'curtain', a particular choreography of bowing, a *mise-en-scene* of gratitude, which, for the performance itself, is external, yet is still its final scene. Such an ending, even when the applause is artificially compelled, the actors experience as a justified recognition of their efforts and skill. Whistles and protests are far rarer, especially in insufficiently cultivated circles, although, for the actors, even the suppressed dissatisfaction of a barely audible clapping is sufficient punishment. The famous clown Grock, in his autobiography, notes one such drastic occasion; nobody clapped him, nobody whistled, nor did anyone openly ridicule him; after an unsuccessful performance, visitors to the Vienna Cabaret, without a single uttered protest or visible gesture, departed in complete silence. But applause may be withheld in a more majestic manner. It may be withheld when the sublime thrill of the spectacle arouses a thrill in us, when we are struck dumb by our enthusiasm and amazement. Perhaps that silence lasts but a moment, but it expresses more than any

eloquence can. The public is then caught in a state not far removed from that which we know as religious ecstasy. When their amazement abates, the public once more responds with applause. They respond with an applause to which good actors become so accustomed that, with time, they begin to experience a favourable public as a special form of allies and faithful adherents. Hence, every different reaction, on the part of the public, surprises them, worries them and makes them wonder. As though these people who run us down are not the same people who applaud us, as if they do not praise us and curse us for the same thing ...

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