

Getting Together and Falling Apart

Applauding audiences

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Black. [Applause.]
You do not hear anything, but you see six performers bowing, showing facial expressions of happy relief, moving one after the other towards the apron in slow motion, bowing again and retreating into the line of six. Then, one of them says: 'We were doing it for you'.

Ivana Müller's *Playing Ensemble Again and Again* (2008)¹ enlarges and prolongs that very moment of the performance when – at first glance – the performance comes to an end and the audience is asked to react to it, be it with acclamation or with objection. The fringe or margin of the performance which still belongs to the performative setting but adheres to different rules, has come to be the most important occasion for audiences to participate, if in a very specific and arguably limited way: by applauding, booing or refusing to do any of these. At the beginning of Müller's piece, we are deprived of the very sound and action of applause, and I do not feel myself in the position nor in the mood to fill in. Thus I am put in a strange position of asymmetry between the unambiguous situation I see and the insecure role I face as an audience member. Am I implicated in this scene of conventional curtain calls and expected applause? What kind of participation am I allocated in (not) applauding? Can I synchronize myself to an imaginary applause and become 'audience' – at the same time part of an imagined audience and of the one which inevitably comes into being during that evening and while

applauding? Are we rehearsing applause? Are we to rehearse applause?

Applause, you could say, is a negotiation of acknowledging and estimating a performance (in the sense of its success), and it is being produced by and authenticated through gestures which sum up that effect we come to call applause. It is aimed at an object, an accomplishment, a performance, and at the same time at all the others who constitute an audience in that very moment of acclamation or disapproval.

Applause is a collective gesture. Try to applaud as an individual; it might feel rather as if you quote applause, and you will not be able to sustain it for a very long time. Applause functions in a collective, and it produces collectives. It is an action which at the same time already is a re-action calling for other reactions.

Gestures of applause are not only visible bodily movements, but produce audible effects as well. They use the hand like an instrument for producing sound, and can be accompanied by other actions, visible or audible, like booing, encores, crying, laughter etc. Clapping functions as transmission of information and affect through space, and its temporal horizon is essentially rhythmical, has a certain duration and requires repetition in order to be readable as applause. The gestures of clapping can be differentiated and reinforced through temporal means; amplification, multiplication and duration produce intensity.

Proposing to investigate a historically

¹ Premiere Leuven, Belgium/Playground Festival, STUK, October 31, 2008. Concept, choreography and direction: Ivana Müller; Performers: Katja Dreyer, Karen Røise Kjølland, Bojana Mladenovic, Pedro Inês, Daniel Almgren-Recén, Rodrigo Sobarzo; Text: Ivana Müller, Bill Aitchison and the performers; Lighting design and technique: Martin Kaffarnik; Sound design: Viljam Nybacka; Artistic advise: Bill Aitchison. A video trailer of the performance can be accessed at <http://www.ivanamuller.com/videos/>. All quotes from the performance according to my notes during the performance from October 23, 2009.

established, rather non emphatic concept of participation - theatrical applause - allows to put under scrutiny the ways in which participation is informed by synchronization and rhythmic differentiation. The idea of action (within the audience) at the intersection of moving and being moved is of central interest for my argument which examines the possibilities of participation within the framework of theatre and the conventions of audience behaviour.

Such a concept of action cannot be developed without taking into account the intrinsic interrelatedness of 'performers' and 'spectators'/ 'listeners'.² There is no such thing as an achievement of the performers when separated from its counterpart, that of the audience members, and it is the specific achievement of those who perceive which I am especially interested in. I would like to show in how far the work spectators and listeners do is being subjected to a similar process of differentiation and refinement as the one the performers go through.

When arguing that applause turns a spectator/ listener into an audience member, I am referring to a concept of collective not to be misunderstood as a unity or an institution, but rather a temporal gathering of individuals, experiencing the effect of synchronization and proximity to others for a limited time. Participation, in this sense, comes into being by moving and being moved and exceeds the active - passive binary. This latter operation implies a much too easy judgment about theatre audiences associated with quietly sitting in their seats, being completely concentrated and absorbed by the spectacle unfolding before their eyes ('passive') as opposed to a notion of the audience related to performative practices beyond institutionalized, fourth-wall theatre which would imply mobile spectators, more loosely engaged with the action (or more directly, i.e. bodily involved by that: 'active'). Already historically, it would not have been possible to address a theatre audience as passive in the sense mentioned above. Not only interpretation and translation in Rancière's

sense of the 'emancipated spectator', (Rancière, 2008) but also all kinds of bodily actions, kinetic and verbal interventions (applause, booing, cheering, shouting, not to speak of wandering around, eating, bringing your MP3-player to the performance) make it impossible to speak about spectators as either passive or active. Our understanding of the 'passivity' of the audience has been ideologically impregnated by Wagnerian and, later on, naturalist theories of spectatorship which cannot be claimed as a performative reality at any time. Taking a closer look at the dynamics of (historical) audiences reveals the manifold options beyond passivity or activity which turns this odd singular into some sort of plurality, a collective divided many times in itself, constituting engagement with a performance between affirmation and difference, pleasure and critique. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether 'progressive', participatory performances are in fact enabling, while 'traditional' performances have the effect of something like a sedative. Participating through applause, one could add, makes an excellent case for the need and the difficulty to differentiate between immersion and participation: participation requires decision-making, while immersion does not allow such a distance and liberty.

HISTORIES OF CLAPPING AND CLAPPERS

During the 19th century, clapping advanced to the preferred gesture of affirmative participation in the performing arts. Besides that, common utterances of acclamation or rejection were calling actors by their names, calling for encores, hissing, coughing, knocking, stamping one's feet, or heckling (cf. Primavesi, 2008: 363).

The history of being an audience is quite a recent one, if it is understood as the history of attentive listening and watching, at least if you restrict perceptive attention to actions performed on the stage or on the music podium. What we know as the perceptive mode of silence and stillness, may be called an invention of

² This resonates the way in which processes between stage and auditorium are being addressed through the model of a 'feedback loop' by Erika Fischer-Lichte. According to Fischer-Lichte, the 'opposition between acting and observing collapses' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 59). As 'perceiving subjects', spectators act by doing certain things and by what is happening to them. (This latter aspect - central to me - is not explicit in the English translation of this passage (cf. Fischer-Lichte, 2004: 100).)



• Interior of an Opera Box at the Paris Opéra (Académie royale de musique, Rue Le Peletier), lithograph after Eugène Lami, 1842.

the nineteenth century (or, more precisely, of late eighteenth century Vienna). For quite a long time though, this new mode of attending performances competed with what could be called a multifaceted attention to partners in a conversation, interesting guests and actions on the stage or the podium which was rather usual until far into the nineteenth century. In Peter Szendy's description, the new bourgeois ritual of attending concerts allows an experience of listening and watching in a bifold way: listening as listening to what is being performed, but also as watching how others (and oneself) listen. This new cultural disposition of listening comes along with the establishment of public concerts, professional concert reviews and a specialized music press. Attentive listening, says Szendy, results from a process of interiorization of critical voices (that of the composer, of enthusiasts, of critics, of claqueurs): listeners experience competing voices (*polémologie*) which take hold of our inner ear (Szendy, 2000: 100; cf. Szendy, 2008).

This shift in modes of attention happens

in a decidedly economy-driven environment, not only regarding the attention economies of listeners/spectators, but very specifically the professionalization of performers and the subjection of appearing on a stage to the mechanisms of the market. And it seems to be no coincidence that clapping became the predominant mode of acclamation at the high time of the virtuoso performer.

Vladimir Jankélévitch, the philosopher and Liszt scholar, identifies the transmission between performer and listener/spectator by pointing to their fundamental reciprocity: during a successful performance, the audience is virtuosic together with the virtuoso, it shares his omnipotence. This is the effect of the virtuoso's charisma: the audience celebrates its own triumph. In the same way, failure makes the audience doubt itself. All this irrational. The more suspect the victory, the blinder and less justified the ovations. In a circle of enthusiasm and disappointment, the admirers first celebrate the admired performance and then celebrate their admiration, applaud their own applause.

Enthusiasm becomes inflationary; success gives birth to success, booing gives birth to booing (Jankélévitch, 1979: 104ff.).

In this scenario, 'the audience' reacts to a sense of audience which had gained reality even before the entrance of the performer in its specific economy of expectation, attention and enthusiasm. This audience is built by a conglomeration of individuals, but through enthusiasm, participation in an event seems possible as a temporary synchronization between pleasure and profit.³

Before this backdrop, a then newly established kind of professional audience or audience of professionals plays a crucial role: the notorious 'claque' especially in nineteenth century Paris.⁴ The claque can be understood as a symptom of a culture of performative negotiation of performances, be it triumph or fiasco.⁵ At least as ambivalently received as the virtuosos, the claque is the symptom of a turning point in the first half of the nineteenth century in which a) new (broader, more heterogeneous) publics develop which cannot (or not any more) dispose of necessary criteria to measure accomplishments; b) we see new kinds of performers (the virtuosos) which operate at the threshold of ravishing excellence and charlatanry; and c) the economic set up of concerts and performances changes to private businesses in which unreliable and instable measurement of achievements became an economic risk and had to be avoided by insurances against failure (insurance being the concept with which the claqueurs advertised their services).

Claqueurs as strategically operating actors within the audience aim to produce synchronizing effects by which the aesthetic and economic success or failure of a performance can be steered and by which achievements are being acknowledged in a collective process. For the claqueurs, applause guarantees the success of a performance to a similar extent as the performance of the actor/musician. The claqueurs' performance is measured by the very criteria of artistic success, it becomes a

performance within the performance.

The esteem of their performance may be deduced by the fact that in the 1830s, the *chef de claque* of the Paris Opéra, Auguste Levasseur, received a higher salary from the artistic direction of the opera house than the prominent singers. Claqueurs were usual in the concert business, but never as successful and persistent as in the Paris Opéra where the claque became a permanent institution in between audience and staff (cf. Walter, 1997: 332 ff.), covered by contracts with the singers and the artistic direction. The Paris claque consisted of up to 100 actors for a premiere who were placed in the auditorium strategically and directed by Levasseur. The *chef de claque* decided upon his strategy after studying the libretto, attending rehearsals, engaging in conversations with the artistic director, with singers and assistants. The claque he then had to orchestrate to the desired overall effect had quite differentiated roles for the individual actors. Besides the *tapageurs* (the vehement clappers) there were e.g. the *connaisseurs* (who were supposed to utter murmurs of approval from the more expensive seats and were asked to recite verses and make commentaries), the *rieurs* (those who laughed), the *chatouilleurs* (who were supposed to entertain their neighbours through snuff and treats or cheerful conversation), the *pleureuses* (those who had to weep, mostly women), the *chauffeurs* (who had to go into raptures in front of the posters and extol the performance), and of course the *bisseurs* (calling for encores).

'TONIGHT'S SHOW WAS ABOUT GETTING TOGETHER AND FALLING APART.'⁶

The gestures of the applauding claque are not at all signs of overwhelmed enthusiasm, but result of calculation. Nevertheless, by corporeal (movement-driven or acoustic) transmission, they are capable of inducing clapping in other parts of the audience, in listeners who might have been undecided in their judgement so far. In this process of synchronizing

³ I would like to thank Kai van Eikels for pointing me to that.

⁴ This is not a closed chapter of theatre history. Besides from evidence that theatrical claqueurs still existed way into the twentieth century (or still operate today, see the documentary on today's Italian opera houses *Opernfieber*, written and directed by Katharina Rupp, D/CH 2004), the claque has a still vital afterlife most notably in the pre-recorded applause of the television laugh track. There are more recent phenomena though like the professionally organized trading of 'likes' on Facebook.

⁵ Until now, there has not been written any substantial study of the claque, only shorter essays and passages in histories of theatre, opera or music. Nineteenth century literary texts e.g. by Berlioz, Balzac, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam as well as treatises or autobiographies by former claqueurs serve as source material.

⁶ Quote from Ivana Müller's *Playing Ensemble Again and Again*.

⁷ This information was accessible at <http://www.ctopera.org>. After the closing down of the company, the website was shut down.

• Honoré Daumier, from the series of lithographies *Croquis Pris au Théâtre*, in: *Le Charivari* 13.02.1864.

© www.daumier-register.org
The caption reads: "Who says, Parisiens are never satisfied! Not one dissatisfied visitor in the first four rows. It's true, all Frenchmen are Romans." In French theatres of the 19th century, the claque is often referred to as "les romains" ("the Romans"), alluding to the 'invention' of the claque by Roman emperor Nero who had his soldiers applaud his own appearances on stage.

different 'oscillators', to use Pikovsky's term, (Pikovsky, 2003) applause is being generated as an expression of acknowledgement of a performance, and according to the psycho-physic interaction, it may even produce a feeling of enthusiasm in those formerly undecided. Any judgement about performances is dependent upon the few being able to set fire to the many, said Berlioz (1852: 93). A little more bluntly and as recently as in 2009, the Connecticut Opera elaborates on 'Opera Etiquette': 'When should I clap? Opera was designed for applause.... If you're in doubt, just follow the lead of others in the audience.'⁷

Focusing on the claque and its actions, one comes to a better understanding of the dynamics of excessively uttered applause in theatrical audiences. Different parts of the audience interact, oscillating between something closer

to an unmediated expression of the body, a deliberate decision and that kind of automated behaviour Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam fantasized about in his 'machine à gloire' in 'The Glory Machine', 1874. (Villiers, 1985) Villiers sketches an electro-mechanism which executes complete control over the (applause) performance, blurring the distinction between claque and non claqueurs to the extent that there is no outside of the claque. Subordination under the vote of the majority is not only necessary, but desirable in Villiers' scenario.

Beyond such a totalitarian set up, every successful performance bears so many risks of failure that it needs lucky coincidence (cf. Jankélévitch, 1979: 52 ff). Steering this coincidence is what the claque turns into the business of 'assurance des succès dramatiques' (Lan, 1883: 286 ff); promising an insurance against performative risks which tries to make the prevention of fiascos a calculable factor, similar to all the then newly established insurances against personal risks like fire.

In the gap, in the moments between the last gesture or the last sound of the performer and the reaction of the listeners/spectators, gestures meet. Those in the audience with a special sensibility (but it could be any, it need not be an expert) take over the movement impulse and make it visible, audible and movable. In order to predestine success or failure, handbooks and claqueurs' treatises isolated such crucial moments. Sometimes composers or authors indicated them already in the scores or libretti.

But the success of the claque's strategies themselves and of any applause becomes evident only in retrospect. There is a fundamental a-synchronicity within the setting of producing synchronization: one can only say that something *has been* a success, while during applauding, it can be turned into a non-success at any moment.

The extent of differentiation of roles of acclamation or disapproval which could be seen in the Paris Opéra's claque points to the subtle intertwining of attitudes, parts and

CROQUIS PRIS AU THÉÂTRE par DAUMIER



— On dit que les Parisiens sont difficiles à satisfaire, sur ces quatre banquettes pas un mécontent. — il est vrai que tous ces Français sont des Romains

dynamics which first of all constitute this strange singular 'audience' as a manifold divided collective. A collective bound together by synchronizing gestures of applause, not much more.

MARGINALIZING APPLAUSE

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the custom of applauding performers at the end of the performance became more and more common. During the course of the nineteenth century, actions of the audience members were more and more restricted by theatre laws. Historical forms of 'looking away', to quote Irit Rogoff's term⁸, had to be abandoned: there was a ban on walking around, on eating and drinking, on allowing bodily functions to be heard like coughing. Excessive movements and exuberant actions had to be limited to the gesture of clapping hands, accompanied by vocal utterances. The aptness of these actions - the right moment - was more and more restricted to the fringe of the performance, the threshold between performance and non-performance.

But along these lines, applause itself became suspect. Already in the late nineteenth century, special orders for applause ban were implemented. These resulted in the domesticated and sparingly applied segments of applause which - still - characterize the bourgeois practice of symphonic concerts (no applause between movements or for singular highpoints; applause is aimed more at the work of art than at the execution).

At the threshold between 'performance' and 'non-performance', collectively displayed attention switches into a spectator's/listener's individual response which - individually uttered - produces collectivity at once. He or she applauds the performers who just stopped performing or did not quite stop doing so, still carrying the radiance and the shadow of their role and their achievement with them.

There were (and to some extent, in classical ballet and in a certain repertory of operas, there

still are) other occasions for applause than the curtain calls; applause which is aimed at the very moment and the single difficulty or beauty: after the long expected bravura aria in *belcanto* opera, or during the 32 *fouettés* of the ballerina in the final *pas de deux*. Even Richard Wagner, arguably the theatre theorist as well as practitioner associated most with disciplining audiences and marginalizing applause, is said to have bravoed from his box into his favourite moment of the flower maiden scene in *Parsifal*⁹ (quoted in Csampai, 1984: 131). But this has come to be the exception.

But what kind of participation do we speak of when addressing audiences which are restricted (or restrict themselves) to applauding after the show? The collective attention of, say, the audience in the Bayreuth festival house sanctions even coughing with aggressive looks or hissing. This form of collectivity implies *public solitude*, in Herbert Blau's term, (1990: 257) which makes the single spectator within the darkness of the auditorium even more perceptible in her or his singularity. What happens when the single one moves back into the light at the fringe of the performance, when her or his action and reaction is called upon in form of applause? When her or his applauding gestures - via the multiplying sound quality of clapping - synchronize themselves to those of other single ones and become collective action, possibly even in unison? And at the same time, applause implies its other, disapproval and rejection. This conflict constitutes the audience in its odd singular sense as well. The institutionalized combat between claque and anti-claque seems to be only the most obvious incarnation of the confrontations and negotiations of nineteenth century audiences. In applause, one finds an ambivalence of affirmation and difference, of abandoning oneself to pleasure and success and at the same time claiming a critical potential.

'Hey spectator, hey spectator, I am hiding in the dark, [...] I am waiting for your call, [...] this is

⁸ See Rogoff, 2005. Irit Rogoff's account of participation as 'looking away' makes an interesting claim for distraction and distorted or defocused attention as an important mode of engagement with art.

⁹ Weingartner, Felix, 'Erinnerungen an die 'Parsifal'-Aufführungen 1882', in Weingartner, Felix (1923) *Lebenserinnerungen*, Wien/Leipzig, (quoted in Csampai, 1984: 131).

the moment now.' In one of the later sequences of Ivana Müller's choreography, the performers sang these lines to us in a chorus.

For me, it was never so weird to applaud than after this performance dwelling on curtain calls and the lack of applause. Apparently, it is hard to show enthusiasm gesturally after having been walked through the constructedness of audience behaviours. To applaud seemed similarly mechanic and somehow inappropriate as in Villiers's applause machine. But there were some 'bravos' in the Hebbel am Ufer 2 on October 23, 2009.

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