

Applause: The Empire of Assent

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If some frail, consumptive equestrienne in the circus were to be urged round and round on an undulating horse for months on end without respite by a ruthless, whip-flourishing ringmaster, before an insatiable public, whizzing along on her horse, throwing kisses, swaying from the waist, and if this performance were likely to continue in the infinite perspective of a drab future to the unceasing roar of the orchestra and hum of the ventilators, accompanied by ebbing and renewed swelling bursts of applause which are really steam hammers — then, perhaps, a young visitor to the gallery might race down the long stairs though all the circles, rush into the ring, and yell: Stop!

Kafka, 'Up in the Gallery'²

I shall skip the preliminaries so as to take my cue without delaying from an experience which has tormented me for many years now. I shall talk about this sensation of annoyance and embarrassment which grips me at the end of a lecture, a concert, a theatrical spectacle [*spettacolo*]³ or some other public event — and even, increasingly frequently, at the end of film screenings — when everybody punctually and without fail starts to applaud. Setting aside personal idiosyncrasies, so far as this is possible, I would simply like to ask myself the following questions: what sense do all of these instances of applause have and why does such punctuality make them by now both predictable and inevitable, almost as if the applause were an 'absolute' of our everyday lives? Is it true that applause — having started out as an occasional gesture and signified appreciation of a very precisely delimited class

¹ *Assenso*, throughout this text, ambiguates between 'assent' and 'approval', as when one applauds to show one's approval after or during a theatrical performance, but also to show one's (somewhat passive) assent to a point of view expressed in a political debate. Readers should bear in mind that the word is translated sometimes one way, sometimes the other. Only where confusion might otherwise reign or when an etymological connection is being drawn has it been deemed necessary to insert the original word in square brackets. All such interventions are the responsibility of the editors.

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Thanks are due to him, as well as to Marco Piasentier, for checking our translation and making a number of very valuable suggestions. — Trans.

² Franz Kafka, 'Up in the Gallery', translated by Willa and Edwin Muir in Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Vintage, 2005. — Trans.

³ A crucial — technical — word in the present text, which is why we take the liberty of translating it literally as 'spectacle' throughout, even if something less impressive might sometimes be apt. — Trans.

of performances, which is was until some time ago (but how long ago, in fact?) — is becoming something new, something disoriented and disorientating, something that is truly *unheimlich* [uncanny], something that is increasingly out of place, and which is tending to assume a sense that has come to differ and is perhaps symptomatic?⁴

Let us begin with a little portable phenomenology of applause that can be divided into four points:

- a) A round of applause can be given or received, depending on whether we take the perspective of the agent or the patient, of the actor who gives a certain performance, or of a member of the audience who benefits from the performance in a more or less passive way.
- b) A round of applause is not a linguistic act, in the sense that applause does not entail the use of the spoken word (apart perhaps from shouting the word *bravo*, which is to say acclaiming someone, but in any case, this is slightly different from applause), but nevertheless, it is an act endowed, without doubt, with some linguistic or semiotic value, and it is, therefore, an act of assent [*assenso*] or approbation [*approvazione*].
- c) It is possible to participate in applause in a direct or indirect way, in the sense that if I applaud at the end of a concert, I assist with something in a personal way, whilst if I hear a round of applause on television during a chat-show or a sitcom, that is quite a different matter. Here it is possible to think that, in this case, I am not applauding, but the matter is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. Let's say that, after a joke made by a television presenter, followed by applause, real or fictitious, from the audience, similarly real or fictitious, I smile, amused. In this case, can we really say that I am not applauding, which is to say, that I am not demonstrating my approval [*assenso*] of that which I see and hear, lending assistance to the 'spectacle'?
- d) The final characteristic of applause: its binding force, injunctive, imperative, which places us before a stark alternative: *in or out* [o dentro o fuori] — either within the collectivity which applauds [*la collettività che applaude*] or without, either within *everyone who is applauding* [*il tutti che applaudono*] or without. An alternative which only allows us to choose either the stupidity of the applause or the idiocy of those who exempt themselves from it. In fact, 'stupid', according to its Latin etymology, is someone who is amazed or stupefied [*stupito*], delighted [by something 'stupendous'] [*ammirato*], or struck by something (from *stupeo* are derived both *stupor* and *stupidus*),

⁴ The following reflections are strictly related to Tarizzo, *Homo insipiens. La filosofia e la sfida dell'idiozia (Homo Insipiens: Philosophy and the Challenge of Idiocy)*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004.

whilst ‘idiotic’, according to its etymology, which is in this case Greek, is someone who stands apart, the individual [*singolo*] that isolates itself from the community, it is the one who, in the end, even constitutes the figure of the inexperienced [*dell’inesperto*] or of the uncivilised [*dello zotico*] (all of these acceptations being present in the words *idioteia*, *idiotes*, which derive from *idios*). In light of the above, it is not without interest that Roland Barthes remarks: ‘For some years, a unique project, apparently: to explore my own *bêtise*, or better still: to *utter* it, to make it the object of my books. In this way I have already uttered my *bêtise* “*égotiste*” and my *bêtise amoureuse*. There remains a third kind, which I’ll someday have to get down on paper: *bêtise politique*’.⁵

But, what is a round of applause? First of all, we shall try to find an answer in the dictionary. ‘Applause’ is defined in the Zingarelli dictionary as a ‘spontaneous and clamorous expression of both favour and approbation [*approvazione*], expressed by clapping’, from the Latin *applausus* – made up of *ad* and *plausus* – which signifies the same thing. Therefore, to applaud signifies simply putting your hands together in a show [*segno*] of approbation and in a spontaneous manner. And here we straightaway find the first discrepancy between the word and the thing that I would like to highlight. In the age of the technical reproducibility of applause, applause is no longer spontaneous, and is perhaps no longer even clamorous.

As far as I know, a history of applause has not yet been written. It does not even exist, to my knowledge, a history of the audience [*del pubblico, dell’audience*⁶], which retraces its historical and cultural transformations, and which reconstructs, so far as is possible, the attitudes and behaviours displayed by an audience in front of spectacular events (theatrical, musical, the circus, and so on). On the other hand, if a history of the audience were to be written one day, an important chapter should certainly be devoted to applause, namely to the various forms of approval and disapproval [*assenso e dissenso*] expressed by the audience, which always assume a historical and cultural profile.

Now, we should ask ourselves: what would we read about contemporary applause, applause as it is configured in our day, in this hypothetical universal history of the audience. We would probably read a similar observation to that of Günther Anders, thrown almost casually into the middle of some caustic observations on our current inability to take up a position when placed before an image (televisual or cinematic):

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 [1984], p. 366 (‘Deliberation’, Journal entry of July 22nd 1977). Translation slightly modified.

⁶ ‘*Audience*’ in Italian is an Anglicism which we have elided here and on another later occasion, which we have nevertheless marked. Throughout, we have translated ‘*pubblico*’ as ‘audience’, save in the epigraph from Kafka, where it is translated as ‘public’ to conform with the existing English rendition, and in occasional adjectival forms. – Trans.

We are cheated of the experience and the capacity to take up a position. Since we are not capable of taking cognisance of the vast horizon of the world that today is really ‘our world’ (since ‘real’ refers to something that we can encounter and upon which we depend) in direct sensible vision, but only through images of it, *we encounter precisely that which is more significant in the form of apparition and fantasm*, and therefore, in shrunken form, if not actually in a form altogether devoid of reality. Not as a ‘world’ (a world that can only be appropriated by moving around in it and experimenting) but as an *object of consumption* delivered to our homes. Those who have consumed an atomic explosion from the comfort of their own homes, in the form of an image delivered to one’s home, which is to say in the guise of a mobile picture-postcard, now associate everything that one can happen to hear about any atomic situation with this domestic event of microscopic dimensions, and this entails their being cheated of the capacity to conceive of the thing itself and to take up an adequate position in relation to this thing. That which is delivered in a fluid state, which is to say, in such a way that it can immediately be absorbed, renders impossible, because superfluous, a personal experience. Actually, for the most part, the requisite position is itself kindly provided along with the image, and few things are so characteristic of broadcasting today as the free home-delivery of applause.⁷

Let us pause for a second on this particular feature of contemporary applause: most of the time, it involves indirect applause, which is neither received nor given in the first person. In other words, we assist in the applause of others, which we are called to give our assent to by way of contagion. Televised applause takes this form, yet it is still an invitation or a command – *inside or outside* [o dentro o fuori]. However, given that the only way in which to express disagreement [*dissenso*] or step outside, in a situation like this, would be to immediately turn off the television, we can conclude that for as long as the television remains switched on, we remain inside [*dentro*], we are giving our assent, we are applauding even without moving our hands. The same could be said for the laughter played in the background of jokes on a sit-com or comedy. We laugh without laughing, as long as the television is switched on, we laugh without moving our lips, and at times – indeed often, almost always, if you pay close attention – our fantasmatic laugh does not follow directly after funny jokes, but is instead urged and released by fake, televised, laughter, the task of which is to dictate the timing of the reaction and coordinate our position

⁷ G. Anders, *L'uomo è antiquato II. Sulla distruzione della vita nell'epoca della terza rivoluzione industriale* [The Obsolescence of the Human. On the Destruction of Life in the Age of the Third Industrial Revolution]. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992, pp 232–33. Original: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, Band II: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*. Munich: Beck, 1988 [1980].

with respect to the programme. But if the joke is genuinely funny, why resort to such a stratagem, why intersperse witticisms with this laughter that erupts before immediately fading, in so unnatural a manner? Why force us to laugh? And why should we laugh in such a contrived manner? Why should our laughter be wrung from us by this vampiric cackle?

A few years ago, Quentin Skinner gave a memorable lecture at the Sorbonne about laughter and philosophy, reviewing some of the classic theses on the subject.⁸ It is not necessary here to go into too much detail. It is enough simply to recall the importance of this theme for the philosophy, and indeed the politics, of the modern age. It is enough, for example, to remember the overt hostility of Hobbes towards an emotional reaction like laughter: ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly’.⁹ For Hobbes, laughter, in practice, is a source of disequilibrium and disorder in interpersonal relations, and it is always the expression of a suppressed hatred, of man’s natural undying enmity for the other man, which undermines the established order – this is why it is a question of sterilising the disruptive force, condemning without appeal the invisible hostility of laughter. For Spinoza, the great heretic, laughter is on the contrary a benign phenomenon, a passion that should be valued, since it is the key to an increased activity of the mind and body, or of man as such – this is why it is a question of cultivating the experience and strengthening rather than diminishing its affirmative power: ‘Cheerfulness [*hilaritas*] [...] is pleasure which, in so far as it is related to the body, consists in this, that all parts of the body are affected equally; that is [...], the body’s power of activity is increased or assisted’.¹⁰ Now, the historical analysis of the diverse philosophical conceptions of laughter from its origins up until today is of little importance. What is important is that laughter appears in every case to present a subversive face, the face of a man who rejoices in himself, who says ‘yes’ to his own mind and his own body – whether others pay the price for it (Hobbes) or whether nobody pays anything (Spinoza). This is the nomadic power of laughter, laughter’s purely affirmative force, in spite of everything and everyone. The one who laughs, first of all says ‘yes’ to themselves. And from this point of view, the question immediately becomes political. If politics is in fact the art of inducing man to say ‘yes’ to an other man, *homo ridens*, the man who says ‘yes’ to himself, at this point creates a problem. (This explains why philosophy, and indeed politics, have in the past pursued this problem and why it is wise for philosophy and politics today to return to it).

⁸ Of the many other reviews in existence, one could cite as an example – to mention but one – the entry on *Humour and Wit* written by Arthur Koestler for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural And Politic: Part I, Human Nature, Part II, De Corpore Politico*, with *Three Lives*. Ed. J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 54-5 (Ch. IX, 13).

¹⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics; Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect; and Selected Letters*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Seymour Feldman. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, Part IV, Prop. 42.

Let us return to laughter in the third personal form of today's audience, the laughter track. This in fact provides an elegant way of escaping from our impasse. Because this laughter is not true laughter; it is applause. Those who laugh when sitting in front of a television screen do not say 'yes' to themselves, but to others, who laugh in their place. It would seem that nothing of this kind has ever truly appeared until now. The role of the chorus [*choro*] in ancient tragedies, which also took place between the tragic scene and the audience in the theatre, was certainly not to applaud; and during a comedy [*commedia*], in the past, it is plausible that one laughed differently to how one laughs today, or how one applauds today. Indeed, there was no form of laughter which anticipated our way of laughing. There was nobody who laughed in our place. Even today, given that counterfeit laughter does not belong to anybody, being disembodied and mindless, *anonymous and spectral*, there is *no one* [doing the laughing]. Therefore, responding to their bidding, we too lose body and mind. Here, our laughter becomes applause, which is to say, a modality of assent, no longer to ourselves but to others. Laughter changes its nature, and along with it, the man that laughs and says 'yes' to the *no one* who takes his place. This may appear to be an exaggeration based on a detail that is in the end marginal. However, God, as we know, hides in the details.¹¹ And the God in question, above all, is the last one we can still venerate, or rather applaud, even in those precious moments in which we once adored or said our prayers in rapt recollection (think, for example, of funerals). This God, our God, is the spectacle.

The spectacle laughs at itself. This is the perhaps definitive proof that we are dealing with the last God. Nietzsche had forewarned us of this: 'Gods are fond of mockery: it seems they cannot refrain from laughter even when sacraments are in progress'.¹² The God of the spectacle laughs at himself, eliminating the possibility of laughter in the first person, or rendering it ever more slight. But, where is the spectacle? There are spectacles wherever we applaud, wherever we venerate our God. This means that even the God of the spectacle, like those who preceded him, needs all of us in order to reign. Not only this, it also means that applause determines and generates the spectacle. It signifies, that is to say, that we can at this point give a formal definition of the spectacle. *A spectacle is anything that we applaud.* Not everything is a spectacle in today's world, as Guy Debord believed. If this were indeed the case, if we really lived in the realm of the 'integrated spectacle', in which one could no longer distinguish reality from the spectacle,¹³ we would not be able to see the spectacle, we could no longer grasp its spectacular nature, and we could not give a definite and comprehensible sense to the word 'spectacle'. However, if

¹¹ See also the comments on '[a] meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men,' in M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1991, p. 141.

¹² F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 1990, §294.

¹³ G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone, 1994, pp. 8, 13-14

not everything is a spectacle in today's world, this is because everything tends to be transformed into a spectacle. The index of this transformation is applause. Not only the index, but also the driver. Every time that we applaud, in the most disparate of circumstances and in situations that are increasingly unthinkable, we actually create the spectacle.

Let us try to clarify some features of today's applause.

- a) *Applause creates the audience.* If we agree that in the present condition, applause generates the spectacle, or transforms ever more disparate phenomena into spectacular events, then the following is a logical consequence: applause does not just create the spectacle, but it also creates the audience, in the sense that by applauding we qualify as an audience.
- b) *Applause is increasingly invasive.* Today, the audience happens to hear and watch outbursts of applause which come from within the cinema screen, in a play of reflections between the real audience and the fictitious audience which conveys the invisible command to applaud and assent to the scene that both audiences are contemplating at that moment: the scene – for instance, a romantic kiss in the centre of a stadium, perhaps with the crowd giving a *standing ovation* [in English in the original] – becomes a surface for reflecting the real audience into the fictitious audience, or the place where the audience, oscillating at this point between reality and fiction, encounters itself.
- c) *Applause is for everything and nothing [il contrario di tutto].* For example, on the television, when rounds of applause occur almost continuously during a debate, expressing approval [*assenso*] first for one argument then for another, counterposed and contradictory to one another. That which remains, in the background, are not the two arguments, but applause as such, approval *qua* approval [*assenso qua assenso*], which makes these encounters truly 'spectacular'. Prima facie, all of this can seem trivial, and is usually explained in another way. The effects, however, seem to go far beyond the intentions of the actors and moderators of the debate. The effects, with the passing of time and the repetition of the scene, are those of an injunction [*ingiunzione*] to pure and unconditional approval [*assenso*]. It is no longer a matter of an injunction to approve [*assenso*] this or that argument, this or that joke, this or that character. With time, the injunction to approve is purified and evacuated of all content, so as to be transformed into an injunction which enjoins approval as such or the pure form of approval, the functioning of which is the only constant in this staging [*messa in scena*]: the applause of the audience in the room, which transforms the scene

into a spectacle, turns each and every one of us into a member of the audience.

d) *Applause integrates, globalises or totalises that which we call the world.* Applause is an assent, it is a saying-‘yes’. But, in how many languages can we say ‘yes’? In response, we just need to ask ourselves: in how many languages can we applaud? In fact, applause is a universal language, it is the language which we all speak today. But who are we? There is no answer, there are no words, there is no language in which to respond to this, except the language of applause, which crosses over all national, social, cultural, ethnic and religious frontiers. In other words, the only human community which today tends to impose itself, that which we shape globally and worldwide, day in day out, swept away by an unstemmable tide, is the community of the audience [*del pubblico, dell’ audience*], a community that everybody is being included in, *volens nolens*. Applause is the slender thread which holds everyone [*tutti*] together, which makes us ‘all’ [*tutti*], which makes us “us” [*noi*]. A slender thread but as robust as a chain. Is there any need to remember that the wall, which until a couple of years ago divided the world in two, collapsed, not through violence but beneath volleys of applause? Is there any need to remember that antennas are now spread all over the globe to capture the applause which each day echoes on a planetary scale? A famous American actor recently spoke about his journey to the Amazon, a land in which he hoped to be able to stroll in peace without being immediately surrounded by delirious fans. Vain hope, he said, amused, since even there he had quickly been identified: Aren’t you the one from that ship which capsized? Applause. Installed, in the centre of this village, hidden away in a far-flung corner of the globe, a satellite dish – altar to the new God.

We could and maybe we should continue. After all, these are but fragments of an analysis of applause in its current configuration, which should be completed and perfected. Now, I should like to emphasise the idea that is behind all of this. Applause is a practice [*pratica*]; I would even say that clapping your hands is the simplest thing in the world. For this reason, one cannot think of it as a practice of power [*una pratica di potere*]. Briefly put, the idea, or my idea at any rate, is not that there are certain evil figures who covertly manipulate the society of the spectacle (the State, the multinationals, the secret [masonic] lodges and so on, as in the fantasy of some). The idea is not even that of a microphysics of practices of power (*à la* Michel Foucault) which is often short-sighted in its views when it comes to the properties and specific characteristics of the current means of communication (properties and characteristics without history, which are the random and contingent results of technological fabrication, but which turn history

on its head) or the ‘becoming-spectacle of the world’. The idea, to be completely frank, is that power [*potere*] is not the right concept here, that this category is no longer appropriate, at least not in the guise (or in the guises) which it has assumed until now. (To clarify this affirmation slightly, suffice it to say that in the world of unconditional assent and of the *no one*, even the category and symbolic authority of the Father tend to vanish, as Jacques Lacan noticed years ago: hence the widespread and restless interrogation of fatherhood in all of its aspects and symbolic valences, which have become a recurrent and almost obsessive theme of cinema, for adults and children). Rather, we find ourselves faced with a complex and stratified process of reorganisation of the *frames* [English in the original] within which humans experience and assert their own humanity, reconfiguring their reciprocal relationships in search of new, unpredictable balances. We are dealing with a ‘systemic’ process (but I am not referring to Niklas Luhmann here) in which many factors are interwoven, some old and some new: that is, background historical factors and current factors of technological renewal which are imposing relevant and sometimes dramatic modifications within human ‘forms of life’ [*forme di vita*]. From the spectacularisation of the world to the irruption of biopolitics, we are dealing with processes that are connected to technological innovation, in the face of which philosophy and politics of a traditional type appear to be ever more disorientated. (Whence the insistence on the problem of ‘technology’ [*tecnica*] on the part of some key thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Günther Anders, Gilbert Simondon and Jacques Derrida, to name but a few). The acceleration of technological process is rendering obsolete, at least in part, the old philosophico-political categories, making it urgent and necessary to invent new ones. In fact, the agents of these processes – namely, ourselves – may be said not to be aware of them. Thus it is not that these processes are necessarily a force for evil, just as it is not the case that they are a force for good. In short, it is not a matter of expressing value judgements. If anything, it is a matter of opening our eyes to what is happening around us, of observing, describing and deciphering – employing, if it proves useful, new conceptual tools. This is the sense of the definitions that follow, which are meant to be provocative rather than exhaustive.

THESIS

Applause is today both the index of and the driver for unconditional assent [*assenso*], or assent *qua* assent.

DEFINITIONS

- 1) I propose to define as democratic, or participative, a political regime based on the principle of free consent [*consenso*] and legitimate dissent [*dissenso*].

- 2) I propose to define as a tyranny, or despotic, a political regime based on the principle of forced consent and sanctioned dissent.
- 3) I propose to define as totalitarian a(n) (anti-)political regime based on the principle of unconditional assent [*assenso*], which is neither a free nor a forced consent since it no longer entails an effective alternative to dissent. (It was George Orwell, who in his book *1984*, brought to light the absolute inadmissibility of dissent in a totalitarian regime, which is based quite to the contrary on the principle of unconditional assent).
 - 3.1) Unconditional assent can refer to a precise ideological content or it can be deprived of all ideological content: in the first case, we shall speak of incomplete totalitarianism, while in the second case, we shall speak of complete totalitarianism. (These concepts are coextensive with those of ‘concentrated spectacle’ and ‘diffuse spectacle’, proposed in their day by Debord, though they are not synonyms of the latter).
 - 3.1.1) Unconditional assent [*assenso*], from which it is impossible to dissent in any respect, may be opposed only by dissidence: a totalitarian regime is a political regime which fights against dissidence.
 - 3.1.2) To unconditional assent, which can assume the guise of ideological assent or pure assent, corresponds two forms of dissidence: ideological dissidence and pure dissidence.
 - 3.2) Dissidence is not a refutation or negation of assent but rather the suspension of assent: in a totalitarian regime, every refutation or negation of assent is nullified by the game of unconditional assent. (Ludwig von Mises was the first to bring this game of unconditional assent to light, alluding precisely to this when he spoke of the ‘polylogism’ of totalitarian regimes).
 - 3.2.1) Dissidence is not dissent: an incomplete totalitarian regime rules out the very possibility of dissent on the basis of Ideology; a complete totalitarian regime does the same thing through the Spectacle.
 - 3.2.2) Dissidence is questioning: in the case of a totalitarian regime of Ideology, we shall speak of partisan dissidence; in the case of the totalitarian regime of the Spectacle, of nomadic dissidence.
- 4) I propose to call philosophy every discourse that revokes the unconditional by means of questioning: philosophy is pure dissidence.