

PART 1

Picture this situation.

On one side, the performer, or: the speaker, the artist, the actor, the dancer, usually lit, visible.

On the other side, in the dark, unseen and unheard: the spectator.

We have all been in this situation, on one side or the other of the divide.

We are in this situation now, with myself reading from the page, and you in attendance.

And where we see a divide, the suspicion arises that, at some point in the past, things weren't so. Wasn't there a time when the theatrical divide wasn't so stark? When this was a place for animated exchange and friendly heckles?

In his book *The Fall of Public Man* Richard Sennett pays heed to this nostalgia. For Sennett, public life has been gradually eroded by an insistence on the individual, and this can be seen very well in the modern theatre, where a silent audience plunged in darkness has come to replace the once lively gathering of people, fully visible and vocal. In the 18th and 19th centuries, writes Sennett, 'when an actor turned to the audience to make a point, a sentence or even a word could bring immediate boos or applause'. In an opera, 'a particular phrase or high note could rouse the audience to demand that the little phrase be immediately sung again [...].' Gradually the applause changed: 'One did not interrupt actors in the middle of a scene but held back until the end to applaud. [...] The house lights were dimmed too, to reinforce the silence and focus attention on the stage'. This led the way to the pitch black auditorium, its silence a mark of bourgeois respectability: 'Restraint of emotion in the theater became a way for middle-class audiences to mark the line between themselves and the working class.'

According to Sennett, we sit silently in the dark theatre, suppressing our emotions, unsure of ourselves, perhaps reading a programme so as to know what we ought to be thinking, whilst witnessing what he describes as 'the full, free, and active experience of a public performer'.

So spectators are passive consumers, performers are active producers, in Sennett's view of the modern theatre. And if we accept this critique of the theatre, then it makes sense to want to heckle. In this model, the heckle *would* be a challenge to the perceived authority of the stage and its inhabitants: the heckler *would* redress the power balance, equalise the playing field, reaching energetically across the gulf, the divide. As if to say: "I don't want to just sit here and watch passively, I want to move about and be heard. I want to perform. I want to be like you stage actor, 'full, free and active'".

If the audience's role has been degraded, then the heckle *would* be the attempt at returning to past protocols and models of behaviour. A somewhat despairing cry in the dark, a protest against this strange situation in which someone watches someone else doing something.

The heckle *would be* all these things. But I suspect it isn't.

Sennett's critique essentially equates the fact of being visible and heard with emancipation or authority, whilst invisibility and silence are markers of oppression, or a stifling bourgeois formality.

And so, enter Michel Foucault, and his rather more nuanced understanding of power relations.

Foucault reverses the power balance in the oratory situation: for him power is not tilted towards the speaker, but rather towards the listener. It is the people who listen and attend that hold and exert the greatest force, over the speaker. So from Foucault's perspective, the heckle would be a cry issuing from the oppressor, not from the oppressed. The audience holds sway. How so? Here is the German director and writer Heiner Muller, commenting on the impatience of theatre spectators. He writes:

"The public almost cannot stand pauses in the theatre...[take] Beckett; he gave exact lengths to the pauses because he knew that directors and actors are afraid of them. An actor is already scared stiff when he cannot move or say anything for only ten seconds. It's against the arrangement. There is an agreement, a rule: I pay and you work. The actor works, and I as a spectator pay. But I want him to sweat, this actor, for the money I'm paying him. If he doesn't do anything for a while, that means he's relaxing, the swine, on my money, and I won't have that."

Heiner Muller's spectator has paid to be captivated by the working performers. "Perform or else". And if the performers do not dominate the audience, they will be eaten up. Or at least, they will be heckled, provoked into work.

If the actor, the performer, or even the work refuses to captivate, or operates at a slower pace, or stands still for a moment, or plays with expectations, or fails to conform to received expectations of what performance "should be", then we can expect a heckle. Why? Because something is different, the rules haven't been followed, the situation has got out of hand and needs to be returned to familiar coordinates. The audience has become self-aware, and that was not in the contract. "Who is in charge here?" The heckle, truly, is not a challenge to authority. It is a calling up of authority. A desire for order. To heckle is to police.

PART 2.

I want to focus on the epidermal. To approach the heckle from the point of view of sensibility. The heckle irritates me, and I want to understand why. The heckle, to me, is like a STOP sign, suddenly appearing at a cross-roads, forbidding everything and everyone from passing, moving, happening. There is something about the heckle that reminds me of the arrogance and self-assuredness of the bully, the bully who interrupts you as you go about your way and imposes a demand, for no reason other than to assert their control and get a kick out of tripping you up. Am I exaggerating? No, because right now I'm portraying a sensibility, not an argument.

What I don't recognise in the heckle, what displeases me, angers me, depresses me, is the assumption that an animated verbal confrontation, in which one person voices an idea, against someone else's, in a kind of agonistic display that will determine a winner and a loser, is the best way of relating to one another. It isn't, there are other rhythms, other ways of being in common. [The agonistic model is one in which my temperament typically fails. As soon as someone declares war, even in a friendly sort of way, I want out.] If the medium is the message, the heckler's message is always the same: "play this game, or lose". The heckle does not open up possibilities, rather it closes them down, by reducing the situation to that of a two-sided combat. And in order to get away with its own imposition, the heckle comes disguised as an invitation. It is an act of closure that dresses itself up as carnival, as spontaneity, as interaction.

To return briefly to Sennett and Foucault.

The Foucauldian model highlights the invisible and silent pressure that an audience exerts on the performers. But it acknowledges a certain reciprocity, a basic relationality that is the very stuff of theatre.

Sennett's model, in which the spectator has become oppressed and needs to rebel against this state of affairs, doesn't recognise relationality: the stage performer is full and free, whilst the spectator has been wronged and victimised and so, like a child, blind to the needs of the adult, the heckler cries out: "I am here. I want. Enough about you. What about me, what about me." The heckler's cry demands that someone play the role of the responsible adult, it calls for someone to take charge, it demands looking after. Someone needs to calmly explain to the heckling infant: "you know, just because the performer is on stage, it doesn't mean that what they're doing is about them. They are not full, free and active, as Sennett writes. They are presenting something for our consideration. We lend them attention, and they work with that attention.'

The heckler is a kind of adult infant, especially given that the word 'infant' literally means 'unable to speak'. In fact, there is something about the heckler that verges on the pathological, or even the psychopathological, if we take the word to mean a profound misrecognition of others and the violence we do to them through certain actions.

An anecdote from a few years ago: a performance by the ground-breaking British group Forced Entertainment was showing at Bristol's Arnolfini. An audience member, who was known to be somewhat troubling to local residents, interrupts the show, commenting loudly: "This isn't ground breaking, I'll show you ground breaking". And so he walks on to the stage, pulls down his trousers and shits on the floor. A worried usher starts calling out: "Is this part of the performance? Can someone please tell me, is this part of the show?"

I wasn't there, so I don't know how the situation was resolved, or if I'm representing it accurately. But what strikes me about it is the heckle's unwittingly perfect metaphor: the heckler is someone who shits on the space of the performer, demanding that this act, which has nothing to do with the performance itself, be seen as having more worth and value than the show. It

is also the scene of the infant offering up his or her faeces to the adult parent as a gift: 'look what I've made'.

So, again, the heckler is asking for someone to play the part of the adult parent.

The heckle is not a challenge to authority: it is shit expelled so as to call upon an authority figure, someone who can take care of the situation.

That's one reading, anyway.

But to return to a question of sensibility.

The heckle offends me. Why?

What offends me about the heckle is the so called 'common sense rationale' behind it, which is really a set of assumptions.

One assumption at work in the heckle, especially relevant in stand-up comedy contexts is the idea that the performer reveals him or herself through how they cope with the heckle. The performer's act is just that, an act: their *real* talent and skill, who they *really* are, is measured by how they deal with the interruption. It's the school of hard knocks, boys & girls, and you either get with it or get out.

Another assumption at work in the heckle, perhaps the one I distrust the most, is that an audience that is expressive, "Mediterranean", and visibly engaged, is somehow better than a contemplative, "Northern European", inwardly engaged audience.

Personally, one of the things I like about the British is a kind of restraint of expression, the politeness, a desire to not invade another's space and time, especially in the context of theatre, which is all about making time and space for another.

Still we like to idealise other times and places: where people talk spontaneously and freely, like children, who are pure. Places and times where there is no theatrical formality, no white cube restraint, where people are finally themselves. I wonder how much holidays to hot Mediterranean countries are to blame for this fantasy. We go to Sicily, we see people greeting one another, hugging and kissing joyously, heckling, and we think "here all is alive and unrestrained". In fact, there is a fundamental Britishness to Sicily and its people.

It's July 2008, I'm at the end of a three-week holiday in Sicily, an island largely unknown to me despite it being my father's place of birth. Together with a friend, we walk the streets of Palermo for a few hours into the evening, get a take out pizza and find a small square, or more of a tilted cross-roads somewhere in the historic centre, where we stop and eat. It slowly dawns upon us just how much is going on here: there is a busy restaurant, a street market is closing down, a bunch of kids and teenagers kicking a ball about, scooters criss-crossing the streets, a group of drunks, cats, dogs. It's not the social gathering that I'm attracted to - the different representatives of society all under one metaphorical roof, no. It's the fact that different rhythms can exist alongside one another, without either one dominating: the speed and rumble of the scooter, the bounce and shoot of the football, the cries of children and the drunk, the mild mannered chat and laughter of the restaurant.

No one rhythm interrupts the others. There is a kind of allowed disharmony here, a sonorous multitude orchestrated by no one, involving everyone. There are exchanges here, of course, people greet casually, but not necessarily with big open arms and friendly smiles. Everyone is pretty much minding their own business, in full view of others.

All of which reminds of the theatre, not because Sicilian people are animated, like performers, no: rather, because when attending a performance, I can be in public, with people, yet also alone with my own thoughts, feelings and associations. I can be attached to the crowd yet independent from it at the same time. Different rhythms can co-exist in the collective. And there's a great freedom in that.