

**IHSS Covid-19 Working Group
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Title: Clapping and Trust

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The first night that Clapping For Our Carers began on 26 March 2020, I was moved to tears. In our ground floor ex-council flat, on an unexpectedly balmy evening, the roar of applause began. Neighbours appeared, silhouetted against their doors and windows, clapping, cheering, filling our eerily quiet estate with noise. Across the way, in the next block over, my 92-year-old neighbour Daphne waved to us vigorously, laughing. Daphne had lived through the Blitz, had been a crystallographer for the Ministry of Defence, and had fully rewired her own house in the Cotswolds, before moving to a Hackney council flat in her 70s because she fancied a change. This was our first sight of her since lockdown, apart from some worried phone calls, and hasty food drop-offs, frightened as we were of making her sick. Clapping for carers also became the weekly act of waving to Daphne.

This moment, in which a London council estate became visible to itself through the act of clapping, was short-lived, finishing on 28th May 2020. The instigator of the Clap For Our Carers initiative, Annemarie Plas, called for it to end, saying of the politicians applauding weekly on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street that, 'it was also up to them to pick up the bill and start doing more than just applaud, because the applause was actually for us normal people.'¹ Clapping for carers, it was feared, had led to the NHS – the manifestation of the welfare state's care for its citizens – being framed as a charitable, rather than a publicly funded, organisation, covering over the harm that years of austerity had done to the institution. The narrative of NHS workers as 'heroes', working on the 'frontline' of the pandemic harnessed World War II metaphors to militarise an imagined battle against an invading enemy – Covid 19. The act of applause was accused of harmful sentimentality which heroized NHS workers, ignoring the material conditions of their work, or their distinctive professional status – as medics rather than soldiers. As a nurse put it, 'we're not heroes, we're professionals doing a job – calling us heroes just makes other people feel better when we die.'²

It's easy then, to dismiss this act of clapping for its naïveté, unthinkingly sentimentalising the NHS to detrimental effect. Indeed, after the first few weeks of clapping, I withdrew from the practice myself, increasingly uncomfortable with the implications of rendering the NHS 'heroic' with public support being used to replace – rather than promote – material governmental support for a public health system in crisis. But on the other hand, as a theatre scholar who thinks about the histories of audience behaviour, I want to ask whether this act of clapping was merely a naïve act of faith or trust. Should we assume that the behaviour of crowds is automatically unthinking, unnuanced, without ambivalence or complexity? Indeed, was clapping for carers even actually about carers, or the NHS, in the first place? Could it be argued instead that the act of clapping was a necessary ritual to produce trust and cooperation so crucial for compliance with public health measures during lockdown?

As the anthropologist Lisa McCormick has argued, social crises require interpretation in order for trust in governmental and state action to flourish. The pandemic, she argues, is similar to other moments of crisis in its need for narrative framing and ritualisation: 'the coronavirus pandemic resembles other massive disruptions, such as scandals, assassinations, and terrorist attacks, which become transformed through interpretive

¹ Emine Saner, "'It was surreal watching it': how life changed for the woman behind Clap for Our Carers", Monday 21 December 2020, theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/dec/21/it-was-surreal-watching-it-spread-how-life-changed-for-the-woman-behind-clap-for-our-carers. [Date accessed: 16 July 2021].

² Cited in Manthorpe J, Iliffe S, Gillen P, et al., 'Clapping for carers in the Covid-19 crisis: Carers' reflections in a UK survey', *Health Soc Care Community*, 2021;00:1–8, 6.

processes into ‘riveting moral symbols’³ She reads the Clap for Our Carers initiative as one of the few successful ritualisations of solidarity during the pandemic.

Melodramatic Precedents

McCormick’s suggestion, that crisis requires narrative framing and ritualisation, has some historical precedent in the act of clapping by ‘normal people’ at performances of stage melodrama during the 19th century. Audiences for melodrama were deeply familiar with applauding heroes – and booing, or hissing villains. Melodrama’s culture of applause was precipitated by the rapid expansion of cities throughout the century. This act of clapping came as a response to the experience of dislocation for newly arrived residents of large industrial cities, such as London and Paris. As Steven Marcus argues of this new urban experience: ‘one of the chief components of the distress commonly felt by many people in modern cities is their sense that the city is unintelligible and illegible. The city is experienced as estrangement because it is not perceived as a coherent system of signs, as an environment communicating to us in a language that we know.’⁴

Theatre historians have argued that melodrama helped to render this unintelligible urban experience legible on the stages of Paris and London (and other industrialising cities in Europe and the US).⁵ This working-class popular entertainment form helped to organise and ritualise the new and often bewildering experience of urban life. The estranging affects of urban experience were further intensified for Parisian audiences by the aftermath of the French Revolution. The rationalist and secularising politics of the revolution required a new theatre form that could stage ethical dilemmas without the theological logic that had governed the fate of characters in more traditional forms of tragedy. Rather than the destiny of characters being decided by absent gods as in, say, *Oedipus* or *King Lear*, good and evil now manifested in individuated characters through the performance codes of acting, casting and costume. Where ethical systems were no longer tethered to religious belief, morality became legible purely through visible appearance and conduct. As Peter Brooks puts it:

melodrama is a form for a post-sacred era, in which polarization and hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance, even though we cannot derive them from any transcendental system of belief.⁶

In the melodramatic universe, villains are recognisably villains because they wear black, have moustaches and smoke – and are rich. Meanwhile, heroes are recognisably heroes because they wear pale colours, are physically strong - and poor. While morality was rendered legible through visual codes, it was also constructed in compensatory forms for working class audiences.⁷ In melodrama, the working class hero - not terribly bright but very strong – saves the virtuous working class heroine from the forced marriage or penury that is threatened by the villain. Meanwhile, the villain is generally a member of the middle classes.

³ Lisa McCormick, citing Alexander 2003, in ‘Marking Time in Lockdown: Heroization and ritualization in the UK during the coronavirus pandemic’, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 2020, 325.

⁴ Marcus, Steven. ‘Reading the Illegible’. In *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* vol.1. Eds. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1976), pp. 257-276, p. 257.

⁵ See for example Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance In the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976); Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶ Brooks, *ibid.*, p. viii.

⁷ See Michael Booth, *English Melodrama*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1975), p. 15.

It was the bankers, lawyers, accountants and landlords that formed the figures of 'evil' in this popular form of theatre. These figures of evil stood in for wider impersonal, abstracted systems of finance, law and property ownership. Abstract systems of power and state operation were individuated and personified in this world – it was people, not systems, that did good or bad. Melodrama made clear who was to be trusted – or not – through class markers, making working class audience members the heroes of the stories that they watched onstage.

The theatre auditorium emerged as a ritualised public space for 19th century city dwellers through the act of applause. Clapping the hero – or booing the villain – transformed urban crowds into audiences. Because applause in melodrama requires the collective expression of moral value, produced through crowd behaviour, it did what Peter Bailey has also attributed to music hall, in 'its affirmation of a newly urbanised people settling into a common way of life.'⁸ Diverse audiences drawn from all over the country – or the world - constellated around the performance of collectivised response, making very clear who could be trusted – or not – for a newly urbanised audience, demonstrating, as Roger Gilbert argues of applauding: 'how palpably value is felt to exist by a community whose individual members may differ in all sorts of ways.'⁹

Collectivising Crowds

Melodrama's narrative structures and moral coding have remained culturally present through its lasting influence on popular cinema. It raises an important question of the Clap For Our Carers initiative, which is to ask whether the act of applause was ever really for the NHS in the first place. Rather, we might consider, as with melodrama, whether the act of clapping instead reinforced communities, creating a culture of compliance that promoted the mutual cooperation required in the face of lockdown. In the ways that the audience at *Peter Pan* are asked to clap to express their belief in fairies – and to keep them alive - so too the act of clapping for carers might be understood as a performative one. Clapping may have produced faith in public health measures, and in the social bonds that were required to support them. Clapping helped to make trust come true – and stay alive, reinforced through its repeated weekly production. Clapping incorporated applauders into a corpus of civic participants, making a form of contingent and fleeting citizenship mutually visible and audible. Given that clapping is an act that bestows praise and favour on those being applauded, the act of applause is always an assertion of power – of 'ownership' and patronage. In this, clapping also asserted and reinforced the sense of public ownership of the NHS, made apparent during the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic games. Applauders drew on the shared ownership of the institution of the NHS as a narrative framework to navigate the bewildering early days of lockdown.

The sentimentality of my tears during the first round of applause was an important feature of this ritualisation of solidarity, as McCormick describes it.¹⁰ Sentimentality was precisely the criticism levelled at the act of clapping by a medic in *The Guardian*, accusing it of being "a sentimental distraction from the issues facing us."¹¹ But again, this accusation may have more complexity than first imagined. As with melodrama, sentimentality is an affect often dismissed as one of the 'weaker' aesthetic responses. As Nicola Bown summarises in her defence of sentiment: 'it has rarely been respectable to stand up for sentimentality. Sentimentality is excessive feeling evoked by unworthy objects; it is falsely idealising; it

⁸ Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance In the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 133.

⁹ Roger Gilbert. "Joyful Noise: Reflections on Applause." *Southwest Review*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2001, 13–31, 14.

¹⁰ McCormick, *ibid.*, p. 324.

¹¹ Cited in Esther Addley, 'Clap for our Carers: the very unBritish ritual that united the nation', *The Guardian*, 28 May 2020. [Date accessed: 16 July 2021].

simplifies and sanitises; it is vulgar; it leads to cynicism; it is feeling on the cheap; it's predictable; it's meretricious. In short, it's an emotional and aesthetic blot on the landscape.¹² But sentimentality has a democratic quality too – it is an affect that is available to a wide audience, without requiring rigorous cultural training or aesthetic connoisseurship. To be sentimental is to tune into an affect that can be shared widely with others.

Clapping for carers harnessed the widely accessible feelings of sentimentality to turn NHS workers into 'heroes'. Heroes help to personalise an abstracted system, such as the work of the state through public health measures. Sentimental responses to this 'heroism' help to form mutual bonds of sympathy which may also then contribute to compliance with those systems, organising them through the Manichean logic of good and evil. And in doing so, clapping carers made the pandemic morally legible. By framing NHS workers as 'heroes', the act of applause drew on familiar melodramatic codes and logic to personify wider systems of public health and state intervention. Just as with melodrama, it condensed public health measures within the individualised 'hero' figures of nurses, doctors, cleaners and carers, who bore the narrative role of embodying the pandemic and enabling the correct affective attitude in the requirement of compliance with lockdown.

Of course, as I have suggested above, while there was narrative value in this melodramatic logic, the upshot was to benefit the public's navigation of the pandemic, rather than the actual NHS workers being sentimentalised. Even as melodrama offered the symbolic compensations of heroism to its working-class audiences, it always risked becoming an ideological safety valve, in which resistance and anger were diffused through reassuring stage fantasy. After all, the dancing nurses and flying Mary Poppins of the Olympics opening ceremony were hardly sufficient for the fight against the deleterious changes to junior doctors' working conditions in subsequent years. And so too, the applause for carers did little to ensure that NHS workers were properly equipped and protected while doing their jobs. Indeed, the melodramatic logic underpinning the act of clapping may be why a proposed 1% NHS pay rise could be justified. To remain poor is to remain 'good', goes the melodramatic logic. Sentimental applause turns workers into virtuous angels or martyrs – with no need for proper pay, protective equipment or decent working conditions.

Furthermore, to emphasise the heroism of individuals working in the healthcare system risks depersonalising the structures that support it. The melodramatic logic of heroism and applause makes it easy to trust nurses – and weep for them - but melodramatic logic makes it much harder to trust the institution of the NHS as an arm of the state, as a structural equivalent to the forces embodied by the lawyer and banker. Individuals might be depicted as heroes, but systems such as vaccination programmes risk becoming a stand-in for forms of depersonalised power. This may be why it was possible to clap for carers while simultaneously distrusting vaccinations or refusing to wear a face mask in public space.

And of course, to suggest that applause positively collectivises crowds also ignores the coercive power of clapping. Indeed, clap 'shaming' emerged when neighbours were vilified for failing to appear publicly to join in the applause. The demand presented by applause makes a lack of participation or dissent particularly audible and visible. This is not to suggest, however, that the act of applause was undertaken unthinkingly. After all, any aesthetic judgment (clapping being the expression of such) is always fraught with ambivalence, as Siane Ngai has argued.¹³ Audiences are perfectly capable of resisting

¹² Nicola Bown, 'Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 0(4), 2007, p.1.

¹³ Siane Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge Mass & London: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 53-59.

narrative determination and clapping the 'wrong' heroes. They are also riven through with often competing and dissenting views and by no means homogenous in their response or approach. But clapping and booing nonetheless makes collectives out of diverse and dissenting crowds, it unifies them in a singular act of noise-making and in doing so risks ironing out dissent, difference and ambivalence.

So, while the act of clapping may have been of some limited value in relation to the promotion of trust and lockdown compliance (undone by a flawed and confusing government policy approach and behaviour), it was also rightly criticised for its inadequate, and even deleterious, effects on those being applauded. But clapping nonetheless had gained purchase – the literal act may have been silenced after May 2020, but its symbolic currency remained. In June 2020, Boris Johnson recommended 'clapping for bankers' as the true heroes of economic recovery, arguing that it was: 'our innovators, our wealth creators, our capitalists and financiers' who should be applauded.¹⁴ This suggestion that was met with widespread derision. Johnson's enthusiastic endorsement of clapping was also an artful form of amnesia at his ignominious exit from Addenbrooke hospital in Cambridge to the sounds of booing by NHS staff prior to Covid in October 2019. Theatrical logic underpinned the mockery at the idea that we should clap for bankers and that Boris Johnson should be booed, with the tensions between the figure of the nurse and the powerful and wealthy prime minister reiterating a long history of melodramatic response.

Indeed, even as melodramatic logic may have been partly to blame for the treatment of NHS workers during the pandemic, it was also deployed as a form of counter-protest. Members of the medical community used the symbolic and narrative vocabularies of melodrama to critique the act of clapping. This is what Elaine Hadley describes as 'melodramatic tactics', arguing that strategies of resistance and protest in the public and political cultures of the 19th century borrowed the rhetorical and symbolic logic of melodrama from the stage.¹⁵ These tactics continue. For example, Lisa McCormick cites the director of a doctor's group who re-utilised the militaristic rhetoric of 'heroism' by comparing 'medical staff lacking tests and masks to 'soldiers being sent to war with no helmets'.¹⁶ In the same way, during the tenth Clap for Our Carers event, on the evening of 28th May 2020, a group of doctors in surgical scrubs and masks knelt silently at the gates of No. 10 Downing Street with a banner reading 'Doctors Not Martyrs'.¹⁷ Invoking the logic of the minute's silence – another means to create public space through crowd behaviour – the protest used silence as a theatricalised form of dissent against noise, pitting silence and stillness against clapping and crowds. And, when the NHS proposed a 1% payrise for NHS workers in March 2021, the union Unison staged a mass slow handclap on the evening of Thursday 11th March.¹⁸ The rhetorical gestures of melodrama and of the Clap for Our Carers initiative were now being deployed as a means for protest and critique, either through negation (silence versus applause) or through the direct imitation and citation of those gestures (slow rather than fast clapping).

The meanings of clapping have been reframed multiple times since that first instance in March 2020. I still treasure the memory of our weekly wave to Daphne though. She died

¹⁴ Rob Merrick, 'Coronavirus: Boris Johnson says we must also 'clap for bankers who make our NHS possible', *The Independent*, 30 June 2020. [Date accessed: 16 July 2021].

¹⁵ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ McCormick, *ibid.*, p. 344.

¹⁷ Ryan Merrifield, 'Silent 'doctors not martyrs' protest held outside No10 during Clap for Carers', *The Mirror*, 19 May 2020 [Date accessed: 16 July 2021].

¹⁸ Anon, 'Stand up against 'derisory' pay rise for NHS staff, says UNISON ' 5 March, 2021 <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2021/03/stand-derisory-pay-rise-nhs-staff-says-unison/> [Date Accessed 16 July 2021].

last October – in her sleep from a stroke. She had been terribly lonely through the pandemic, sad at how frightened people were and frustrated by her isolation. We miss her terribly. That moment of waving and clapping, of hearing our neighbours cheer, experiencing, momentarily, the short-lived act of applauding with strangers was a precious one, even though it didn't last. We were really clapping for Daphne and all the others too – neighbours and strangers working out how to navigate a frightening and bewildering new world by making noise together.