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**Crowded spaces**

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# EDITORIALE

Gli autori che hanno contribuito a questo numero sono stati invitati ad affrontare il complesso tema dello “spazio affollato”. Forse, l’affollamento non è semplicemente un processo di occupazione di spazi vuoti già esistenti, ma un processo che trasforma qualitativamente quegli spazi. Se è così, la questione non è più tanto “cosa accade in uno spazio affollato?” quanto “cosa accade allo spazio quando si affolla?” In altre parole, “quali problemi spaziali pongono le folle?”; e, parallelamente, “come vengono concepiti, progettati, occupati e controllati spazi destinati a diventare affollati?”.

Discutendo l’importazione spaziale delle folle sia teoricamente che in casi specifici, sono emersi due nuclei identificabili. Un primo gruppo di autori si è rivolto alle folle urbane classiche e al loro ruolo perennemente controverso nella politica, nella storia e nell’esperienza umana. Stefan Jonsson ripercorre in tal senso la tradizionale immagine veicolata dalla teoria della folla – la folla come “pericolosa, caotica e sgradevole” – sottolineando la rinnovata importanza odierna dell’azione della folla. Secondo Jonsson, se le folle sollevano inevitabilmente la questione dei fondamenti del potere, è perché la loro azione, nell’orizzonte della modernità, ha un portato politico essenzialmente costituente. Da un punto di vista filosofico-giuridico, Lucy Finchett-Maddock esamina come il potere istituito riceva, attraverso la legge, l’azione folla. Di fatto, il modo in cui la legge è in/capace di pensare la folla ha un’importanza cruciale non solo per come essa reagisce a singole proteste, ma anche per come la società nel suo insieme è in/capace immaginare il proprio cambiamento. L’articolo di Federica Castelli si muove ancora più vicino, se possibile, a una fenomenologia della folla di protesta. Da una prospettiva femminista sulla protesta di strada, focalizzandosi sulla relazione tra esperienze, emozioni e sensi, Castelli sostiene l’importanza direttamente politica del corpo sessuato e incarnato che, come scrive lei stessa, “rivela la dipendenza fondamentale, l’esposizione ad altri e la vulnerabilità della condizione umana”. Le immagini dell’artista ospite, Emma Ciceri, introdotte e valorizzate filosoficamente dalla

riflessione di Andrea Pavoni, ci pare combacino bene con le sfaccettature della folla presentate da questa prima tornata di contributi.

A cavallo tra la prima e la seconda metà del numero ospitiamo tra l’altro un intervento dell’urbanista Marco Cremaschi, il quale ripercorre l’ambigua immagine delle folle che nel corso del ventesimo secolo è stata abbracciata dalla disciplina urbanistica. In particolare Cremaschi identifica una discrepanza tra la visione dei modernisti, secondo i quali la folla era sintomo di disfunzioni, e una visione più positiva della folla, di cui si sono paradossalmente fatti portatori per primi non tanto i teorici quanto gli investitori immobiliari.

Il secondo gruppo di autori si rivolge ad alti *avatar* contemporanei delle folle, meno facilmente visualizzabili e tuttavia notevoli. Queste formazioni sono state definite come “folle postmoderne”, ovvero tipi di folle non necessariamente confinate a un registro d’azione politico, come proteste e rivoluzioni, ma che si sviluppano in, o si sovrappongono a registri d’azione non politici che non abbisognano del contatto corporeo fisico immediato tipico delle folle classiche (cfr. Borch, a cura, 2013). Di certo, i nostri hard-disk, le nostre caselle di posta, le nostre rubriche, le nostre pagine di Facebook, anche le nostre barre dei segnalibri possono essere immaginati come spazi affollati. In questo numero, Claudia Aradau e Tobias Blanke, Alberto Brodesco e Andrea Mubi Brightenti propongono alcuni punti di attacco per un’analisi di tali folle e dei loro spazi. È interessante notare come sia proprio a questo punto che interviene un certo numero di fenomeni i quali gettano dubbi su qualsiasi visione puramente apologetica delle folle (uno sguardo, cioè, che si limiterebbe a una semplice inversione del vecchio disprezzo elitario per le folle). In particolare, Aradau e Blanke esplorano l’ideologia contemporanea del *crowdsourcing* nei mercati digitali, rivelando come essa può essere spiegata da una vecchia nozione, quella dello sfruttamento dei lavoratori. Gli autori sottolineano anche l’importanza politica nascosta di queste nuove folle, dimensione a loro avviso tatticamente trascurata dai teorici neoliberali.

# EDITORIAL

Contributors to this issue were invited to tackle the complex topic of crowded space. Perhaps, crowding is not simply a process of occupation of previously existing empty spaces, but one that also qualitatively changes those spaces. If so, the question shifts from 'What happens in crowded space?' to 'What happens to spaces when they get crowded?'. In other words, 'Which spatial problems do crowds pose?' And also, in parallel, 'How are spaces which are bound to become crowded conceived, designed, occupied and controlled?'

In discussing the spatial import of crowds both theoretically and in specific cases, two clear nuclei have emerged. The first cluster of authors addresses classical urban crowds and their enduringly controversial role in politics, history, and experience. Stefan Jonsson reviews the traditional image conveyed by crowd theory – the crowd as 'dangerous, chaotic and unpleasant' – stressing the continuing and even renewed importance of crowd action today. According to Jonsson, if crowds inevitably raise the issue of the foundations of power, it is because their act is, in the horizon of modernity, an essentially politically constituent one. From a legal-philosophical viewpoint, Lucy Finchett-Maddock examines how instituted power receives, through the law, crowd action. Indeed, how the law is (un)able to image crowds has tremendous importance, not only for how protest is met but also for how a society as a whole is (in)capable to image change. The piece by Federica Castelli moves, if possible, even closer to a phenomenology of protest crowds. By adopting a deeply embodied feminist perspective on street protest, one focused on the interplay of experience, emotion and the senses, Castelli argues for the directly political importance of the sexed body which, as she writes, 'reveals the fundamental dependency, exposure to others and the vulnerability of the human condition'. The images by the guest artists Emma Ciceri, introduced and philosophically excavated by Andrea Pavoni, match well with the facets of crowds presented by these first round of contributions.

In between the first and the second round we host a reflection by the urban planner Marco Cremaschi, who reports on how, during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, planning science has entertained an ambivalent relation with crowding. In particular, Cremaschi highlights the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the view of crowds as dysfunctional, a view held by modernist theorists and, on the other, the celebratory view of crowds as vibrant and good for business, a position initially endorsed by urban developers rather than theorists.

The second cluster of authors addresses less easily visualizable yet still noteworthy current avatars of the crowds. These formations have also been defined as 'postmodern crowds/crowds', i.e. types of crowd configuration not necessarily confined to a predominantly political register (such as protests, revolutions, etc.), but which unfold in, or at least overlap with, non-political domains, and which need not assume the physical body-to-body nature of classical crowd imageries (see e.g. Borch and Knudsen, 2013). Certainly, our hard-drives, our mailboxes, our address books, our Facebook pages, even our bookmark bars can be imagined as crowded space. In this issue, Claudia Aradau & Tobias Blanke, Alberto Brodesco, and Andrea Mubi Brighenti propose a few points of entry into the analysis of such crowds and their spaces. Interestingly, it is precisely at this point that a number of phenomena are presented which also cast some doubts on any merely apologetic view on crowds (one, that is, which would merely reverse the old elitist contempt for crowds). In particular, Aradau and Blanke explore the ideology of crowdsourcing in contemporary digital markets, revealing how it may be explained by an old notion, namely workers exploitation. They also emphasize the hidden political import of such new crowds, a dimension which is especially and perhaps tactically overlooked by neoliberal theorists.

Subsequently, just as Castelli's piece was focused on the feelings of street crowds, Brodesco presents a case analysis of feelings in a YouTube crowd commenting the movie *Salò o le Centoventi giornate di Sodoma* by Pier Paolo Pasolini. By following in details the dynamics of the comments and replies, Brodesco points out how especially unclassifiable and uncomfortable cultural products such as Pasolini's *Salò* may elicit harsh commentary struggles that generate what he defines a feeling of 'asphyxiation'. Elaborating on Alberto's piece, Mubi coins

In seguito, proprio come l'articolo di Castelli si concentrava sui sentimenti delle folle di strada, Brodesco presenta un caso di analisi di sentimenti in una folla di YouTube che commenta *Salò o le Centoventi giornate di Sodoma* di Pier Paolo Pasolini. Seguendo in dettaglio le dinamiche dei commenti e le risposte, Brodesco sottolinea come soprattutto prodotti culturali non classificabili e scomodi, quali *Salò* di Pasolini, possano suscitare lotte dure di commenti che conducono rapidamente a una situazione di "asfissia". Sviluppando alcune idee del contributo di Alberto, Mubi introduce l'espressione "spazi sociofugali dei nuovi media" per affrontare la questione di come le popolari piattaforme di *social networking* definiscano, o quantomeno ospitino, fenomeni di affollamento. Secondo Mubi la tradizionale nozione di "distanza critica" potrebbe trovare un'applicazione nel caso delle nuove formazioni di folla online, il che potrebbe anche condurci, suggerisce, verso una comprensione più radicale dei rapporti tra l'individuo e la folla. Nonostante la loro diversità, le diverse folle e le loro molteplici manifestazioni sollevano una serie di questioni architettoniche comuni rispetto ai processi socio-spaziali. Una presenza teorica ricorrente nel corso di questi contributi - che siamo rimasti sorpresi

e contenti di scoprire - è Elias Canetti. Un tempo definito come un "classico perduto", Canetti appare oggi infinitamente stimolante per tutte le nuove generazioni di studiosi e studiose che si occupano di folla. Ci sembra che le autrici e autori di questo numero abbiano fatto un uso molto produttivo di Canetti, che va ben oltre l'omaggio di una rituale citazione; invitiamo di conseguenza i lettori e le lettrici a comparare questi possibili diversi approcci a uno dei nostri teorici della folla preferiti.

In conclusione, molte altre domande che avevamo sollevato nella *call*, riguardanti ad esempio il sovraffollamento ("che sentimenti ed emozioni sono associati agli spazi urbani affollati, siano essi spazi quotidiani banali, come la metropolitana, o spazi eccezionali legati ad eventi, come concerti, festival, *nuits blanches* e manifestazioni politiche? A che senso della temporalità e del ritmo corrisponde l'esperienza di spazi affollati? Come sono ricordati ed evocati a distanza questi spazi?") non hanno potuto essere qui affrontate e rimangono quindi aperte per future esplorazioni.

C.B., A.M.B.

the phrase 'new media sociofugal spaces' to puzzle about how new popular media social platforms define, or at least host, certain crowding phenomena. The traditional notion of 'critical distance', Mubi argues, may find an application to the new online crowd formations. In turn, this may lead us towards a more radical understanding of the relations between the individual and the crowd.

Despite their diversity, different crowds and their manifold manifestations raise a number of common architectural questions concerning unfolding socio-spatial processes. A theoretical looming presence throughout these contributions – which we were surprised and pleased to discover – is Elias Canetti. Once defined a 'lost classic', Canetti seems to be endlessly inspiring to all new generations of scholars dealing with crowds. Because we think that the contributors to this issue have all made a very productive use of Canetti which goes well beyond ritual homage we invite readers to go through these diverse approaches to one of our preferred crowd theorists.

In conclusion, many other questions which we had raised, concerning for instance overcrowding (e.g., What feelings and emotions are associated to urban crowded spaces, ranging from mundane everyday spaces such as the metro to the 'exceptional' spaces of events, such as gigs, festivals, *nuits blanches* and political demonstrations? What sense of temporality and rhythm does the experience of crowded spaces correspond to? How are these spaces remembered and evoked at a distance? Etc.) could not be addressed here and remain thus fully open for future explorations.

C.B., A.M.B.



# Dangerous, Chaotic and Unpleasant Crowd Theory Today

Stefan Jonsson

At the peak of Clinton-era prosperity and affirmative globalization theory, Manuel Castells published a gloomy three-volume work, *The Information Society*, in which he summed up the world situation on the eve of the new millennium. Describing how peoples and regions were being “switched off” from the networks of power and wealth, pointing at the “systematic relationship between the dynamics of the network society . . . and social exclusion”, Castells concluded that “network society” was being perforated by “black holes” into which large parts of the world’s population were sucked up without a trace. Socially committed writers like Castells, Kracauer and Spivak have often argued, though, that these “black holes” are not just sites of elimination. They are also spaces of emergence. “The downward spiral of poverty, then dereliction, finally irrelevance – Castells remarked – operates until or unless a countervailing force, including people’s revolt against their condition, reverses the trend.” Between the overlay of the network and the underlying geography of poverty, a third category appears: a “countervailing force.”

The most captivating books in political theory and social commentary of the last decade, as well as some of the most interesting films and art works, have sought to name and put a face on this force. A year after Castell’s massive volumes, Allan Sekula – the U. S. artist, photographer, and theorist whose work was interrupted by mortal cancer last year – gave a preview of the “countervailing force” in his photographic work *Waiting for Teargas*. It consists of a photographic journal of the victorious demonstrations against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in November 1999.

For four days Sekula walked around in the calm and turmoil of Seattle’s streets, the result being one of the most remarkable documentations of a protesting collective ever made. His gallery shows the usual round of alleged criminals, deluded anti-capitalist youth, fanatic enemies of globalization, swarming free-trade opponents, violent direct-actionists, foolish ultra-greens, tree-huggers and other tribals. Put differently, Sekula made visible the politically engaged citizens who are usually belittled and made invisible by those labels.

Interestingly, Sekula’s camera circumnavigated the action and was typically drawn into the boring hours of waiting that makes up the greater part of a protest march. The result was anti-journalistic: pictures shot without flash, auto-focus, and telephoto lens, by a photographer without press card and without the pressure, common among news photographers, to hunt down the one scene that epitomizes the drama. Clashes and striking batons are absent from Sekula’s pictures. How do you photograph a crowd or a demonstration without resorting to clichés? He asks. His images show not the event itself, not the demonstrations

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or the violent confrontations. Rather, they overflow with the presence of singular human individuals, each of whom has made the self-conscious decision to go out and shut down the WTO summit, in the conviction that many others have made the same decision and that their number will prevail.

If Sekula's work offered a first visual documentation of the twenty-first-century crowd, it was Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as well as Paolo Virno who accomplished its first theoretical

description. After publication of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) and Virno's *Grammar of the Multitude* (2003) readers knew whom Sekula had portrayed. They also knew who were acting in subsequent demonstrations in Genoa, Gothenburg, Prague and elsewhere. It was "the multitude."

*In modern political thought this has been a controversial idea: that real men and women under certain circumstances come together and merge into a unified political subject, the people or the multitude; that this subject embodies a political principle, democracy; and that this democracy takes expression in defined historical events called revolutions*

A term picked up from the pre-democratic seventeenth century thus came to frame debate on democratic reform and revolution at the dawn of the twenty-first. It was not a bad choice. The Jewish-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza from whom Hardt and Negri derived their concept defined the multitude as the basic component of society – the human passions and needs that result in people living in a community. From this, Spinoza postulated an idea on absolute democracy: the governance of all through all, a society in which politics is simply the process of living together.

In choosing the "multitude," Hardt and Negri discarded the notion of the "people." As soon as there is a people, they argued, there is also a leader dictating the common law and a boundary drawn to shut out those who do not belong. The multitude, by contrast, is open, manifold, and boundless. It is a swarm, a network, and a community of communities. In short, the multitude is the motley essence of humanity, a multitudinous subject that produces what Hardt and Negri called *the common*, which is the language, communications, genes, images, feelings and all the other things that must come together in the generation of a society.

As Hardt and Negri argued, however, what used to be taken for granted as common goods – communication, experiences, imagination, lifestyles, relations, care, concern, service, clean water and pure air – is today being privatized and patented, and turned into commodities. Since these public goods are the foundation of social and human life, their privatization paralyzes society. Without free access to the common, people stop cooperating.

The two political theorists thus made common cause with activists and writers such as Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy and Naomi Klein, who all identified the remains of the common as the decisive issue of our time. The social transformation carried out by the multitude will be different from political crises of the past, they predicted. There will be no social class, people or political party that step up to assume power. Instead, it will be a myriad of groupings that relinquish power, causing the whole empire of networks of states, companies, armies and institutions to collapse like an empty shell and rot away. Was this the huge rebellion of the future? Billions of people deserting the system, starting to reconstruct the common amongst themselves?

World-system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein predicted in the 1990s that the first decades of the millennium would see the fall of the "crazy fantasies" of neoliberal capitalism and the coming of a "dangerous, chaotic and unpleasant time." This period would be marked by a

struggle between crowds seeking to democratize the economy from below, on the one hand, and fascist counter reactions, on the other. Thus, as Wallerstein saw it, if Seattle was the first trembling of worldwide rebellions, the war on terror launched after 11 September 2001 gave a first indication of general totalitarianism with global firing power and infinite capacities of surveillance.

Alain Bertho, a French anthropologist, apparently had a similar inkling. Sensing that the 1990s entailed the start of a new political cycle characterized by social unrest, he began “collecting” uprisings and rebellions, not just in the West but in Madagascar, Sri Lanka, China, Guadeloupe, Algeria and, indeed, everywhere else. The result was published in *Le temps des émeutes* [*The Age of Riots*] (2009). Like earlier crowd theorists, Bertho argues that uprisings follow patterns. They are often ignited by the violent death of a young man in the hands of police or other forces of law. Or, they start out as peaceful protests and demonstrations, which turn violent because of awkward interventions by the police. Most often, however, violent riots are sparked as people protest against life becoming too expensive. Today, as in Victor Hugo’s Paris, price hikes on common public services and needs are the main cause of revolt.

And what do the riots signify? Forget the media coverage and the network pundits, Bertho suggests. The only way to get to know a rebellion is to disappear into the crowd. What you will notice, then, is how an uprising oscillates between silence and deafening noise. Bertho displays a geography of anger that testifies to the bankruptcy of our political institutions. In order to understand a rebellion, you have to pass over to those who have been excluded. No matter whether riots explode in formal democracies or dictatorships, they indicate a monumental loss of legitimacy. The riot is an act of disloyalty to authorities that since long have been disloyal to their citizens.

That we live in an age of riots would thus mean that we do no longer – or still do not – live in an age of democracy. Therefore it hardly makes sense to combat or to crush rebellions. Better, then, to provide space for them in politics, so that the silence and the noise can be converted into words.

Until this happens, theorists will struggle over the right way to interpret the silence and the noise. Politicians and molders of public opinion will fight over the right way to politically represent these movements. Interestingly, political scientists and commentators who regard Western-style liberal democracy as a model for all societies are proven wrong by these movements and events. Liberal parliamentary democracy works well and may even be superior to others, but it works only if the socio-economic conditions are stable and the distribution of wealth reasonably equal, which is no longer the case even in Europe. Such conditions failing, democracy no longer develops in a rational way through institutional channels but through the dynamics of social movements. Today, as in the past, democracy is not the finished article, but a work in progress. As French historian Pierre Rosanvallon puts it: “Democracy has no history, democracy is history itself”.

In modern political thought this has been a controversial idea: that real men and women under certain circumstances come together and merge into a unified political subject, the people or the multitude; that this subject embodies a political principle, democracy; and that this democracy takes expression in defined historical events called revolutions. Conservative thinkers have rejected the idea. They see political crowds as an expression of the short-term interests and instincts of the people or, perhaps, of what Edmund Burke called the “swinish multitude”. In traditional Liberalism, too, many have shunned the idea, but this time on

the grounds that the essence of democracy is the ability of individuals to align their own interests in a social contract. In so far as liberals concede that there is a people, a demos, and a popular will, they would never recognize it out there on the streets, but would see it only as the sum of the will of individuals: the average as expressed by the opinion pollsters.

They forget that their own liberal-democratic tradition would never have arisen if people in the past had not acted as they did during the *journées glorieuses* of past revolutions: be it outside the Bastille, the Tiananmen Square, the Leipzig Nikolaikirche, the streets of Seattle, the Tahrir Square, or Gezi Park. No aggregation of the will of individuals, no matter how detailed, can explain why ordinary people sometimes come out onto the streets in their thousands to state their implacable demand: bring us the head of the ruler!

True, in some cases, citizenship and political rights have been attained in a calm and civilized manner. But for the bourgeois themselves it required civil war and bloody revolution. And the process was no more peaceful when the women's movement, the labor movement, the black civil rights movement and third-world liberation movements won their political rights. They were forced to break the law. They were called fanatics, terrorists, agitators, witches, peasants and barbarians. They were suppressed. But they came back. Not until much later did it become clear what they had brought with them – they had brought democracy.

# Law in Numbers

## The Poiesis of the Crowd

**Lucy Finchett-Maddock**

Having written on protest and its variant forms for some years now, whether in squats or on the streets, through law or otherwise<sup>1</sup>, it has become more and more apparent how the right to dissent is altering, with the definite feel there are diminishing spaces in which to resist. This is an obvious comment considering the increasingly public percolated with the private and the new legal obstacles faced by those wishing to voice their discontent. There is a resounding feeling of futility in the face of an uncompromising system of social organisation which has forgotten any of the philosophical persuasions for the rule of law, using more a simulacra of legislative franchise that seeks to justify the rights of the marketised individual, more and more so over the collective, the crowd. At once the private encroachment of the public has meant the actual spaces and their crowds have been either subsumed into commercial enterprises, or the consciousness for crowding and protest itself is now intoxicated with a feeling of claustrophobia, a lack of means of escape. At once space is so crowded with mechanisms and designs of control and the regulation of protest, whilst at the same time disallowing room for the collective, the crowd, the numbers of law and law in numbers. Protest in its basic form is thought of as the crowd, the riot, the mob or the plurality of constituent powers that create constitutionalism, thus to alter and compromise the space of crowds is to alter and compromise the space of law itself.

As I write these words I am aware of a necessity to alleviate this tiredness of the lexicon of Neo-Liberalism against which protest tries its best to place itself, and the need to bring forth a new language through which we can discuss the possibilities for change, and how room can be made for a new understanding of resistance that is not hindered by percolations of the economy and a feeling of confusion and uncertainty. I speak obviously in response to the thematic of this call for contributions where the crowd is the question itself, what questions do the gathering of people for a dynamic multiplicity of reasons – or even just one purpose is enough – pose in regards to space and thus simultaneously how does authority swallow crowding? How does it tolerate, make room for, accommodate crowds? Or the question may be— does law ultimately seek to keep the crowd, the original multitude, within law, and never more allow it outside of its real or imaginary bounds? How often are crowds illegalised? These are some of the questions this issue seeks to disentangle. Flipping it over on the other side – why do we crowd, why do we gather, how do we *do* crowding, how do we consort, conspire, escape and is there always a political motive? What about when we gather

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<sup>1</sup> See research on social centres, squatting and the role of law and space in occupation protest in Finchett-Maddock (2015).

together to share, to experience, to bond or create? What about when we need to escape, the stop-valve of life and law as party, music, poesies and transcendence? This concern for the escape route, the way out, the path to freedom, is a defining one and resonates through protest movements, whether through the fight for freedom from slavery, to fascism through to the reclamation of land from dispossession, no less religions and attempts to temper the banality of the everyday across time. All these pleas have resonated in signs and symbols, expressions in the form of music and art, an aesthetics of collective retaliation that finds

itself either lashing back in a scream of Punk or an enveloping melancholy of Blues that brings forth the pain and suffering of almost physiognomic return. One of the central questions might be – where has this aesthetic manifestation of protest gone,

where are the signs of resistance now? Where are the signs and symbols of the crowd today?

It seems as though there are voices acting as separate entities, a cacophony drowning out the silence, a fitting response to a system of law and democracy that is obsessed with the singular, the individual, whilst at the same time a paradoxical commercialisation of the collective through reams of social networking and online interaction. Where does the crowd happen if the parameters in which they are allowed are purely based on individualist assumptions, the data crowd managed by the aspirations of a contingent philosophy propelled by the singular? Canetti (2000) would call this the 'twin crowd', where there is both a mediated and unmediated manifestation of gatherings occurring in synchrony. When there is a common cause bringing together an aesthesis of protest, this unification, the sum greater than its parts, crowd theorists would argue a collective consciousness that drowns out the silence. The original fin de siècle descriptions of group interaction determine a contagion and experience that is beyond the level of the single participant. In terms of aesthetic movements,

the Arts and Crafts movement or the Bauhaus spring to mind, the Situationists and even the Impressionists, in their day. A paradigmatic shift that whether consciously or not affects a new era, a breaking of the mould and a similarity in tactic and style, one based on a collective movement and assumption of collaboration, the mechanics of numbers coming together to create a greater aesthetic understanding and sharing, a group contribution to knowledge; the crowd in poiesis, the poetry of the people. On the other hand there are indications of individual protest that are effective by their very solitude, their shadowiness, such as the midnight subversions of street artists and the less acceptable daubs of graffiti artists, or very poignantly the lone protests of Brian Haw and his Peace Camp outside parliament from 2001 until 2010 and the portrayal of his resistance by artist Mark Wallinger. These aesthetic interventions demonstrate the singular taking up of space as opposed to the widely understood occupation model which connotes the crowd immediately.

To think of the role of aesthetics within movements and indeed the aesthetics of the movements just mentioned, is perhaps to remind ourselves of the role that signs and images have in resistance, and not least law. The coming together of voices in numbers suggests a choral or sonorous interjection; this strength in numbers is palpable and can be felt by law through its reactions. As in a famous riot case in 1970 (R v Caird), "The law has always lent heavily on those who use the threat that lay in the power of numbers. The acts of any individual participant could not be approached in isolation." This approach has very much

*At once space is so crowded with mechanisms and designs of control and the regulation of protest, whilst at the same time disallowing room for the collective, the crowd, the numbers of law and law in numbers*

been replicated in the more recent cases coming out of the Magistrates and Crown Courts after the London Summer Riots of 2011, where sentencing guidelines were realigned to create the new offence of 'Riot-Related-Offending', the culpability of the masses taken into consideration in the actions of the one individual (see *R v Blacksaw and Sutcliffe*). How does this portray the resistance that occurred and what are the referents of dissent that are either there or somewhat missing? Perhaps we need to re-consider how the image, or sound, or light, or film, or any other form of media that can be used to communicate dissent, can be revolutionised once again by the crowd, whether the aestheticisation of life has brought forth the de-symbolisation of protest through the simultaneous dissolution and contagion of the collective by and through law, to coin a Benjaminian understanding.

The case of Brian Haw, a protestor raising his voice against the British involvement in Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq who singularly camped outside the Houses of Parliament for nine years, crosses art and law, questions of the singular and the collective (and the role of the agent in the crowd) in resistance. In the April of 2005, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCPA) was passed, setting up the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), the act had pinned to it further Sections 132 to 138, regarding 'Demonstrations in the Vicinity of Parliament'. These sections imposed restrictions upon demonstrations within a 1 km radius from anywhere within the boundaries of Parliament Square. On 23 May 2006, the majority of Haw's placards and banners were removed by the police in a night raid, in accordance with ss 134 and 135 of SOCPA. Wallinger's 'State Britain' was a meticulous reproduction of Brian's confiscated display on show at the Tate Britain. Half of the display itself actually fell within the 1 km exclusion zone, thereby posing questions as to the legitimacy of the display, its status as whether art or protest, and whether of course, art can be a form of protest in itself. Most importantly both Haw and Wallinger were expressing a palpable (collective) discontent with the foreign policy decisions of the then Labour government, Haw through individual protest and Wallinger through a replication of this palpability in the form of art as protest or protest art.

But was Haw creating singular moments of protest or was he acting in numbers? Arguably he was affecting what Boaventura de Sousa Santos would refer to as a 'destabilising image' (Santos, 1999), a schism within the norm that allows a moment or a juncture of rupture, empathy for the other, and connection with the group. Haw's stance in front of Parliament was laden with the semiotics of resistance, and not just that of his own but the connotation of the crowd. Wallinger distorts and re-distributes the matter further with his reappropriation of the placards, a literal copy of the protest that is at once legal and illegal, resistance and law, protest and art. The presence of the collective becomes clearer as the message is relayed perhaps, that the displays were not just those of one person, but at least two (Haw and Wallinger). It is interesting to think back to that time and I do remember taking part in a 'Mass Lone Demo' where comedian Mark Thomas had invited individuals to request permission to protest in parliament square, all with separate causes, and yet all the protests took place at the same time. This was effectively showed the short-sightedness of the SOCPA law and is poignant as an illustration of the individual in the collective, and how the law perceives this, critiqued and subverted by the creative crowding and political comedy of Thomas.

A semiotics of the crowd can also be clearly remembered through the tactics and strategies of the Reclaim the Streets (RTS) movement. The RTS were more specifically entrenched within the forms of direct action which dominated the political spectrum of 1990s Britain; their inspiration lay in the reactionary nationwide uprising to the introduction of the 'Poll Tax' by the then Conservative government in 1990, which managed to capture the country's





discontent and distrust of politicians, and their politics. RTS were first formed in the Autumn of 1991, coinciding with the emergence of the anti-roads movement. The use of subversive, Situationist-inspired humour, alongside a little bit of civil disobedience, was typified directly through their symbolic occupation of time and space. The road became the epicentre of the activity and resistance; it was transformed into a 'TAZ' – a 'Temporary Autonomous Zone', liberating the area temporarily, from the constructs of land, time and money. TAZ as an idea was first formulated by autonomist theorist Hakim Bey, and describes the transient and spontaneous character of this form of crowding very well. Playful antics and inverted humour were used as weapons against the enemy; symbolic referents, in the form of 'pedestrianised cars', and others with RUST IN PEACE painted on their sides, and shrubs planted in their interiors. Before long, the street itself became a living, breathing occupied space.

Another example of law responding to the crowd would be the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA) 1994. The law again here was trying to identify its constituent in numbers, its determination to keep the crowd, the plural, the collective, within its bounds. The CJA was made law on 3 November 1994, and was part of a series of previous legislation, dating from 1987, the final draft being the most comprehensive and overarching part of the Bill. It is the contents and implications of Part V of the Act that concerns the collective the most, the final part which covers 'Collective Trespass or Nuisance on Land'. This part of the Act lays down the powers that the authorities have in relation to the removal of trespassers on land (Section 61), in relation to raves (Section 63), retention and charges for seized property (Section 67), squatters (Section 72), and campers (Section 77), to name but a few. Not only were the rights to protest and party curtailed but so too the rights of the nomadic civilisations, namely the Romany gypsies (in their post-modern contingent as the much maligned New Age Travellers), were directly affected, alongside those of the anti-hunt saboteurs, whose rights to oppose what they believed was wrong, were unceremoniously taken away.

So what might be the lessons we can take away from this discussion and bring to the table of contemporary crowding, protest, symbolism and law? It is worth not underestimating the role of escapism within crowding, and as intimated at the beginning, the apparent lack of time to briefly run away, the norm is ever present with an impossibility of creative retreat. As we have seen, aesthetic resistance doesn't have to be purely an artist's re-hashing of a protestor's placards, it does not have to be visible as such but can affect itself through other forms of aesthetic connection. Music and art and creativity put into collective kinesics that which we cannot describe, that which cannot be categorised, and yet the law has to categorise no matter what. By creating new forms, new schisms, new openings for destabilising images, there may be enough time between the creation and the category, for us to escape and resist through the law of numbers, the poesis of the crowd, as opposed to the law of one at the expense of the foundations of constitutionalism.

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# Bodies in the streets

## Assembling, performing, making and taking the urban space

**Federica Castelli**

This article moves from a perspective that takes into account the bodily experience in the crowded space of protests in the squares. From clashes to occupations, the experience of the square forces to (re)think politics in its connection with bodies: bodies that do incarnate dissent by fighting, clashing, meeting, giving life to something. Avoiding the neutrality and the abstraction that have often marked the interpretations on the individual/collective experience in the crowd, this article shows that approaching a general perspective is not in contrast with the account of specific and material experiences of participants.

At the turn of the century both the body and the embodied subjectivity have become relevant issues for several analysis, debates, and political discourses. After the political experiences of the Seventies, feminism and Foucault's biopolitics, the body started to be considered not only as a combination of organs and behaviors, but also as an element of subjectivity and identity, where power can act and have effects. The body is not just a passive and material support for subjectivity. It is a spatial and temporal entity sharing the world with others, immersed in a specific cultural context. Materially, symbolically, culturally and socially defined, the body produces and orients life experiences and individual thoughts. In this sense, body experience is not to be intended as the 'other' of the individual subjectivity.

The body reveals the fundamental dependency, exposure to others and the vulnerability of the human condition. It is the first means of political relationship, unveiling the subject to his plural and exposed condition. Moreover, it reveals the sexual difference as existential, political and epistemological dimension. To root the analysis in gendered corporeality means to take into account the different experiences and political genealogies the gender does dispose in the assembly moment (Castelli, 2013). In the streets, we find different practices and imaginaries coming from different gender-based cultures and traditions of dissent. Women and men act their performativity of embodied agencies starting from different experiences of their own corporeal citizenship. This collides with every abstract theory of the crowd. To focus on the material experiences of the collective moment is then a way to escape from the gendered vision of the crowd inherited from the XIX century, which is in turn rooted in the Western symbolism of power and its account of the relationship between politics, violence and the feminine. From Thucydides to Le Bon, we find a link between brutality, irrationality, unpolitical violence and women (Thucydides, 1985; Aeschylus, 1987; Euripides, 2010; Le Bon, 1895; Barrows, 1981; Loraux 1981, 1989, 1997; Castelli, 2014): an effacement of the political meaning of women's violence in public space and a ratification of their halfway and problematic citizenship (Cardi, Pruvost, 2012; Castelli, 2014). So, in performing the political

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women and men follow different genealogies and have a different experience of the square. They can share a common struggle especially in the earliest moments of the collective mobilization, since history itself seems to remark that every time a mobilization advances towards a more structured or institutionalised phase, the old gender-based hierarchies come back, as the French Revolution, the Commune of Paris, the Arab spring, and several 1970s demonstrations in Italy seem to confirm (see also Duby, Perrot 1990-1991.)

This methodological choice leads to a focus on individuals as embodied subjectivities in their material relation to the space around them, giving an account of individual actions, speeches and desires including that particular kind of political pleasure triggered by the contiguity of bodies in the crowds (Canetti, 1960; Brighenti, 2010). We have learned from

*From clashes to occupations, the experience of the square forces to (re)think politics in its connection with bodies: bodies that do incarnate dissent by fighting, clashing, meeting, giving life to something*

Canetti that physical closeness may lead to an experience of freedom and an opening of new political possibilities. Thus, to focus on the bodily experience of the self means taking into account what defines such material experience: urban space, the others in the crowd and all the emotions that come to it from this specific context.

What is the potential of these crowds to become agents of change of the urban space? Performing the political does reshape the everyday space that orients our everyday life, producing a political act that escapes from governmental dispossession and reinvents the city. Bodily experience and space are deeply entangled. This is even truer for collective protests. Space is the direct and immediate connection the self has with its context. There is a strong link between the subject and urban space through the body, even in conflicts. Every collective moment of political conflict has a strong link with the site of uprising. As for Schmitt's partisan, who finds his strength in the relation with his territory, the recent protest events – from the Exarcheia experience in Athens, to Spanish *indignados*, Tahrir square in Egypt during the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement, Occupy Gezi – clearly show this deep connection.

A protest does not happen in an empty, neutral space, rather, on a physical ground that concentrates people, their experiences and urgencies, and the political power that orients their lives. A protest cannot be separated from the urban space where it occurs. In this sense, a square is an open space between lives and individual issues, where sometimes, for a few moments, a shared political request takes its place: "being there" is a political act. Moreover, people who join the crowd have an "intimate" relationship with the space around them and such a closeness does influence the moment of the protest. This is illustrated by both academic studies (such as Hobsbawm, 1972) and a certain number of political decision and historical facts, like the oft-quoted work of urban reorganization in Paris under Georges Eugène Haussmann. Still nowadays, it is possible to recognize strategies of outmaneuvering protesting crowds by urban design and city planning.

The spatial dimension has biunivocal relationships with the collective moment: it can orient and influence it, but it also changes in virtue of the crowd who enliven it. When a square gets crowded it has a qualitative turn that makes it look different in the very eyes of the people in the crowd (Jesi, 2000). The individual perception of this change has something to do with emotions and political desire. More than just a political urge rooted in material needs, a

political desire is not focused on a specific issue, but pushed by the urge of being there with others, changing the world together. Political desire does not follow the means/end rules, but involves a wide range of emotions that hold together bodily experiences and political choices. Emotions play an essential role in this new way of living the city. For a long time, anger has been recognized as the only emotion possible in a collective mobilization, which was seen as a moment of individual degeneration towards brutality (Le Bon, Taine, Tarde; see Brighenti, 2011). In reality, being in a crowded square does move a whirlwind of different and sometimes conflicting emotions that do reshape the city all around: first and foremost a sense of intimacy with the urban space.

Protesting crowds reshape and give a new meaning to the urban space by giving life to new urban spatial practices (Vradis, Dalakoglou, 2011; Stavrides, 2010). By taking back the city, or at least some symbolic parts of it, protesting crowds give it new life through shared political practices and claim for urban space as a common good. This is a central issue for some of the recent forms of struggles for the right to the city, like square occupations. Occupying a square is different from other traditional forms of protest: it embodies a *caring* for the city, as demonstrators build up and take care of new shared and political spaces (Giardini, 2012). Practices of occupation are rooted in a deep relationship with the territory. Occupying is a political act that tries to combine the reappropriation of urban spaces with the possibility of acting politically. Occupations do not follow the logic of frontal conflict with institutions that is typical of other forms of political protests. A crowded and occupied square does work on a different plan of efficacy, i.e. that of the symbolic and the model. Occupying spaces is not to be intended just as an attack to authorities, but as a symbolic foundation of “a city within the city”: a new symbolic city founded on new rules, which refuses any hierarchical organization, out of parties or institutional government, seeking for horizontal decision-making. Occupying is not just disobeying: it is an inaugural act that establishes a new political community, giving life to new political experiences and practices. Taking back a square is a regenerative and creative act. A crowded square turns into a symbolic and performative place where constituted political imagination can be unsettled, creating a new one and carrying on a shared life dimension. Building up a symbolic city within the city, occupations create new political dimensions which imply collective care and action, and show the possibility of a political and social alternative. Occupying does not just end with a fight against power.

In this new and shared public scene, embodying dissent, and being exposed to care and violence, the body is central to a new idea of politics, starting from the real experience of individuals in their social relationships: a new politics necessarily rooted in physical “being there” – in that place, in that moment; a politics made of relations and political practices among embodied subjectivities opposed to the invisible processes of institutional politics and global finance affecting them. By avoiding the temptations of a neutral theory of the mobilized crowd, it is then possible to rethink the experiences of urban conflict in relation to bodies, asserting a steady link between experience and political theory. In the light of these methodological choices and theoretical reflections it is then possible to investigate the present days in a specific and profound way. The events in recent years have shown the urgency of a political reflection on the new forms of revolt and protest that have occupied the global political scenarios. Many issues are still open. This short article was intended to help somehow to look them in a different light.

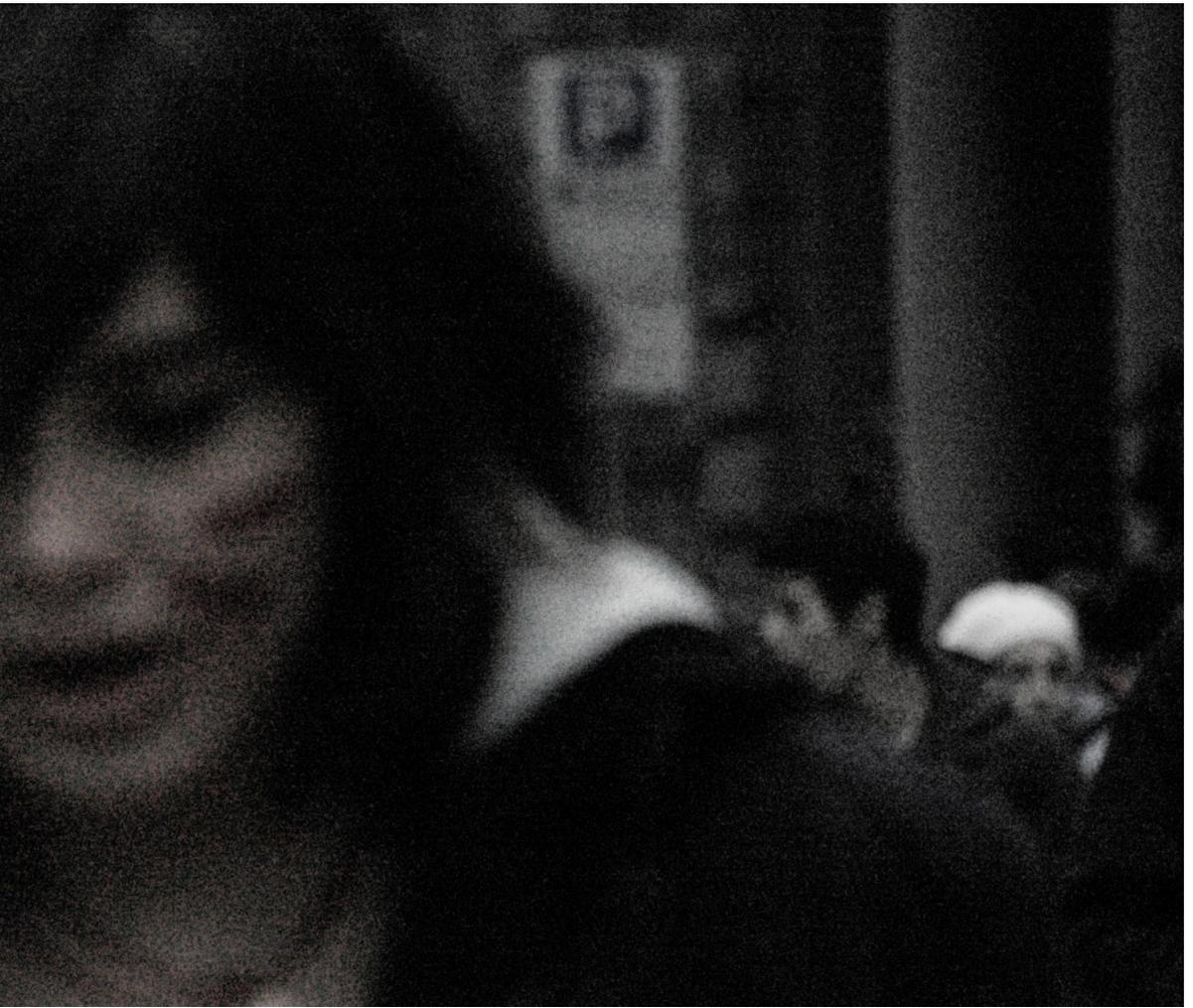


Era questa momentanea sbilanciatura di tratti, questa increspatura non prevedibile in una superficie omogenea che mi attirava.

(Andrea de Carlo, *Treno di Panna*, 1981)

*La folla è una nebbia in cui il drone dell'autocoscienza non può penetrare. Una volta dentro, l'individuo non è più tale. L'immagine di sé si ammutolisce in un segnale statico. Il corpo, trafitto dal contatto altrui (Canetti), si disgrega, si moltiplica. Tuttavia, la folla non è un magma indistinto. In essa le singolarità restano presenti, tangibili, eppure non più definibili o catturabili in un tutto indivisibile (individuum), ma espresse in tratti, scarti, guizzi, esitazioni, ansie ... clinamen improvvisi, sur place, che fanno vibrare la massa d'onde irregolari, che ne sconfessano la supposta omogeneità – tale essa risulta, confusa nebulosa indistinta, faceless, solo a chi la massa la vede da lontano, preferibilmente dall'alto, a debita distanza e, solitamente, con malcelato timore.*

*Senza timore, la lente di Emma Ciceri la penetra e, senza tradirne la densità, ne restituisce l'eterogeneità. Le facce che cattura nella massa son singolarità sciolte, momenti, distinzioni, gesti, posture, istanti congelati e dilatati, intercapedini infinitesimali in cui irrompe un senso che non è ovvio, che non è comune. Normalmente, il viso è un campo di significazione in cui a espressioni ben definite corrispondono significati socio-culturali ben codificati. Ogni tratto, colore e sfumatura che ad essi si ribella, finisce per essere assimilato in un preciso regime di segni in grado di comprenderlo, contestualizzarlo, discipli-*



*narlo. Sei triste? Sei allegro? Hai paura? Sei infastidito? Perché? Forse è per questo che Magritte dipingeva uomini senza volto: “Se l'uomo ha un destino, sarà di sfuggire al viso, disfare il viso ... divenir impercettibile, divenir clandestino” (Deleuze e Guattari, Mille Piani).*

*È esattamente nella massa che il viso in quanto tale si disfa, e con esso la necessità di giustificarlo, di giudicarlo. A patto che non ci si fermi alla superficie, che non la si riduca ad un omogeneizzato facilmente digeribile. Ecco chiarita l'inquietudine in cui queste immagini ci immobilizzano, l'incontrollabile, inspiegabile capacità d'affetto con cui ci scuotono ed ipnotizzano. Lampi, scintille, buchi neri. Divenendo-impercettibili, i volti non si sono dissolti in una tabula rasa come personaggi magrittiani. Au contraire, liberati dal senso comune, non più localizzabili, categorizzabili, in queste immagini essi risplendono, nella loro incomprensibile, contraddittoria, singolare espressività.*

*Andrea Pavoni*

*[Emma Ciceri su ItalianArea](#)  
Courtesy [Galleria Riccardo Crespi](#)*



It was such temporary imbalance of traits, this unforeseeable rippling of a homogenous surface that attracted me.

*(Andrea de Carlo, Treno di Panna, 1981)*

*The crowd is a fog. The drone of self-consciousness cannot penetrate it. Once inside, the individual is no longer as such. The self-image freezes into a white noise. The body, perforated by the other's touch (Canetti), disintegrates, multiplies. However, the crowd is not an indistinct magma. Within the crowd, singularities are still present, yet not longer definable or seizable within an indivisible whole (individuum), but rather expressed in traits, swerves, leaps, hesitations, anxieties ... sudden clinamen, sur place, that make the mass vibrate in irregular waves, denying its alleged homogeneity – the mass appears as such, a confused, indistinct, faceless cloud, only to those observing it from safe distance, preferably from above, usually with ill-concealed worry.*

*With no such a worry, Emma Ciceri's lens penetrates the crowd and restores its heterogeneity, without this being a denial of its density. The faces she captures within the mass are loose singularities, moments, distinctions, gestures, postures, frozen and amplified instants, infinitesimal gaps where appears a sense that is not obvious, not common. Normally, the face is a field of signification wherein well-coded socio-cultural meanings correspond to well-defined expressions. Any rebellious trait, colour or shade is swiftly assimilated within*



*a precise regime of signs, through which it is understood, contextualised, disciplined. Are you sad? Are you happy? Afraid? Annoyed? Why? Perhaps, this is why Magritte used to paint faceless men: "If human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face ... to become imperceptible, to become clandestine" (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus)*

*It is exactly in the mass that the face as such is dismantled, as it is the necessity to justify it, to judge it. Provided one does not arrest at the surface. Provided the mass is not reduced to a digestible homogeneity. Thus explained is the uncanny disquiet that these images exhibit, their inexplicable and uncontainable capacité d'affect, which shakes and hypnotises the viewer. Lightings, sparks, black holes. Becoming-imperceptible, these faces are not dissolved in a tabula rasa like Magrittian characters. Au contraire, unchained from the common sense, no longer localisable or categorisable, in these images the faces shine in their incomprehensible, contradictory, singular expressiveness.*

*Andrea Pavoni*

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# Unmaking and remaking urban crowds

**Marco Cremaschi**

*The city is the crowd...*

L. Chevalier

For a long time, urban planners and their views on the city have been affected by the dominant negative imagery propounded by conservative thinkers such as Gustave Le Bon (1895): the crowd was stigmatised as politically dangerous, dirty, and disorganised. Oddly enough, real estate developers held more open views. For instance, they placed crowds as the basic reference for the design of shopping malls. So, at least the crowds of buyers had some positive resonance to them.

Along these capitalist-oriented lines, a recent trend towards a re-appreciation of at least some distinctive features of crowds seems to be under way. From this point of view, international competition strategies among cities in Europe seem to renew the 19<sup>th</sup> century craze for Great Exhibitions and Universal Fairs that attracted large crowds. So, crowd is back in town after more than a century of mutual hate and enforced decentralisation. However, in the meanwhile both the city and the crowd have changed. No longer do residents and their houses form the twin magnetic poles of the urban field. Rather, movement is now the essential attribute. This fact, I argue, creates problems both at the level of democratic representation and at the level of functional urban organisation.

## **The crowd and the public**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American social psychology spread a view on collective behaviour where crowds were basically defined as gatherings usually qualified as large, lacking order and organization, still involved in a joint behaviour (Mucchi Faina 1983). To sociologists, crowds were characterised by large numbers, physical proximity and mutually reinforcing actions.

In urban planners' usage, the adjective 'crowded' transformed the subject of 'the crowd' into a kind of space whose distinctive feature was to be full. Admittedly, such an idea is generic, given that almost everything can be counted as crowded, regardless scale and salience. 'Crowded' thus embodied a malfunction, a negative attribute of a place which was better maintained when empty.

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Simultaneously, the idea of joint behaviour, with its more positive connotations, was increasingly associated with the figure of the public. The genesis of a modern public sphere was seen essential to modernisation. According to Tarde (1901), while crowd is a material gathering, the public is a sheer spiritual entity. To him, the common ground between the public and crowd lies in the fact that both are nourished by the simultaneity of emotions – the first through face-to-face communication, the latter through a symbolic communicative process.

A similar idea of 'sharing' was essential to 20<sup>th</sup> century urban planners. Indeed, the city is a place where people share feelings and beliefs. In a sense, living in a city is like being in a crowd. By educating to proximity, however, the city was also said to rehearse the creation of publics (Lofland 1989). Even better, 'urbanity' as a mode of life calls for the individual's training to communicate in public. This is the first step of a learning process that enables the development of a community of ideas within a dispersed audience. Without such a process of learning, no civil life can take place, and without the dense social life of urban gatherings no learning process is possible. In other words, only a sophisticated urban dweller is able to develop a common feeling, not only in the presence of other people, but even in a symbolic process such as public opinion.

### **Beyond social space**

Because meetings in public space are primary qualities of urban life, it was possible to claim, with Chevalier (1958), that crowd and the city are synonymous. The concept of social space played a crucial role in French urban sociology. The correspondence – if not identification – between a certain group and a given space worked particularly well in the historical analysis of the first age of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialisation, when dangerous (yet hard-working) classes lived concentrated in popular neighbourhoods surrounding the enclaves of the best-off. Urban planning dealt with social polarisation in a variety of ways. For instance, the first large urban avenues were aimed to cross-cut those divisions digging passages across class boundaries: for the first time people from different backgrounds could actually catch sight of each other in a common space (Berman 1982).

However, late modernity has jeopardized the equation 'city = the crowd'. Neither public gatherings nor the public sphere correspond to city space any longer. Social space now appears as a deterministic concept (Cremaschi 1994). In fact, social relations melt in the sponge-like aspect of urban space (Joseph 1984). In other words, the two poles have changed. The process of globalisation has deeply transformed the rationale of spatial ordering.

A few examples may illustrate this hypothesis.

The first one is the transformation of 'proximity' as a preoccupation in the localisation of advanced services in the global city. Western cities rest on the most astonishing amount of infrastructures, public goods, and central places ever produced, yet the process of decentralisation started in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been increasingly spacing people apart. Industrial activities, middle class families, and company headquarters have increasingly flown central cities.

Second, large urban events have been increasingly employed as strategies for city development. Mega events appear to decision makers and businessmen alike as a natural complement to the ordinary management of the city, primarily from a financial point of view. Events are expected to generate a great movement of people and goods, which supposedly benefit the whole city. A global event often requires new buildings and infrastructures, and the state often contributes to support the financial side of the event, granting further resources

compared to slim ordinary city budgets.

Third, traditional urban inhabitants have become just a slice of the whole population, which now also includes commuters, visitors, businessmen and city-users. Space and its facilities are consumed by people from outside the city, who neither vote nor pay taxes there. Citizenship has therefore become a manifold concept, depending not only upon the abode, but also the place where one works, the place where one consumes etc.

Finally, residential compounds and shopping malls are developed according to marketing principles: instead of being a universal space, every single part of a city now addresses a selected public. Regeneration of inner-cities, for instance, is often triggered by planning devices intended to attract people and create a 'vibrant' urban space (Friedlen and Sagalyn 1989). This amounts to a reversal of the tenets of Modernist Movement in architecture. For instance, rather than as functional channels, streets are restored to their previous dignity of sociable meeting places with mixed traffic.

*Because modernity accelerated the pace of everyday life, everything in the city is crowded: not only the streets, but also urbanites' agendas, minds . . . crowding has become a sentiment, where material details have vanished in a subtle feeling of dispossession*

All these urban strategies seem to rest upon a simple idea: consumers desire a pleasant place to go to, but not a deserted one. The assumption that 'people go where people can be found' is far from trivial, for it incorporates the view that individual identity is a multidimensional network, which social events in the public space can either encourage or discourage. Hence the importance of a suitable, selected 'crowd'.

### **Designers' imagination**

At least three generations of planning practitioners have been concerned with the idea of the crowd, with rather different attitudes. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the crowd was perceived as 'the beast living in the urban habitat'. Urbanisation was regarded as a natural process for mankind, and people moving to cities were expected to naturally turn into urban dwellers. Citizenship was conveyed by the city. Simultaneously, however, hygienist precaution and political fears laid a negative stigma on the crowd which threatened the education to urbanity.

Subsequently, modernist rational planning aimed at the standardisation of the masses (Mittelart 1994). The city conceived by the Modernist Movement is a beehive for tired individuals and a machine for turning masses over. The experience of crowd is removed, basically through the destruction of the street. In low-density suburban settlements, mobility is purposefully kept low to prevent the street from turning into a magnet for social life. In high-rise units movement is severed among specialised vector (high-way, pathway, elevators. . .). Also, different urban functions are segregated and areas are strictly zoned. The crowd disappears as a social phenomenon, and it is only mentioned as a malfunctioning of the urban machinery (the functional equivalent of the crowd is now 'congestion').

But actually, because modernity accelerated the pace of everyday life, everything in the city is crowded: not only the streets, but also urbanites' agendas, minds etc. Crowding has become a *sentiment*, where material details have vanished in a subtle feeling of dispossession. Escape attempts are increasingly difficult (Cohen and Taylor 1992). Somehow, the crowd has assumed more of a temporal than a spatial dimension. As a result, today the crowd stands

bewildered in front of an uncomfortable urban space, calling, if ever, for more controlled environments. Security problems are now addressed through the design of either fully artificial towns (Disney World) or artificial citizenship (corporate cities in the USA).

## Conclusion

Despite planners' distrust, the experience of the crowd has not dissolved. Ortega y Gasset (1930) was surprised to find that cities were crowded with people, hotels with guests, cafés with consumers, theatres with audience, beaches with swimmers, and streets with walkers. However, we know that people only look for those places that best suit the type of fullness they desire. The crowd is not everywhere in the city. Different crowds meet in distinct and distinctive places.

Which is, then, the first interface between crowd and the city? Perhaps, it is still the street, that web of channels allowing for movement. Not by chance, movement and communication are the crucial topics in Park's foundations of American urban sociology (Joseph 1984). Strolling in the Main Street (the Corso, in southern European cities) on Saturday evening and Sunday morning requires 'a pleasant sense of bustle'. It would not make sense without the crowd. Even better, it requires people fit for strolling. Similarly, a mall and a market call for a crowd that is fit for buying, and the same holds for the crowds of theatres, stadia, exhibitions etc. Even summer holidays are often intended, not to escape the crazy crowd, but to find the right one.

At bottom, these diverse situations share two conditions: first, proximity is ruled by the social organisation of space (as revealed by Goffman); second, public space carries out educational as well as emancipating functions. However, movement is unequally distributed: *thick* areas, the great urban axes where circulation concentrates and people are conveyed, can be distinguished from *soft* areas, which are segregated and residential.

Early urban planners tried to command the wedding between movement and the city, not only introducing infrastructures such as the avenue, the boulevard and the *corso*, but also prefiguring the social etiquette appropriate to the distinctive public that would have inhabited them — a task designers of modern highways have neglected. From this point of view, the invention of new public space for crowds appears as a main challenge to contemporary urban planning.

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# The politics of digital crowds

**Claudia Aradau  
Tobias Blanke**

*The natural crowd is the open crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth; it does not recognize houses, doors or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect. (Canetti 1987[1960], 17)*

Is the digital the medium par excellence of open crowds? Unencumbered by material boundaries, digital crowds have been increasingly mobilised in new digital economies and political spaces. For some, digital crowds and ‘crowdsourcing’ harbour the promise of democratising science, increasing participation in politics and new economies of value. In their digital form, crowds appear to embody collective intelligence, which can be harnessed to the creation of surplus value. The ‘wisdom of crowds’ (Surowiecki 2005) is celebrated in economic analysis and hailed as enriching digital worlds. Digital crowds are collectively intelligent exactly because they are dispersed and harbour the promise of unlimited growth. New knowledge is therefore hidden in them, and crowds provide answers where other means fail. The digital crowd could not be further away from le Bon’s postulations on the ‘unconscious and brutal crowds’ (Le Bon 1995 [1895]) or the more recent rationalisations of crowd behaviour. It is exactly the chaos in the crowd, its dispersion, its storage of local hidden knowledge, its range of perspectives and even its emotional charge, which excites and can produce digital value. Crowdsourcing has become the economic model for how to access and deploy crowd power for economic profit (see for instance Dawson and Byng Hall 2012). For others, the promise of digital ecosystems to integrate dispersed digital crowds into a global workforce is effectively a promise of exploitation and precarious working conditions (Blanke 2014, Scholtz 2013).

## **De/materialising digital markets**

In his analysis of the moral economy of crowds in eighteenth century England, E. P. Thompson draws attention to the materiality of markets that make crowd action possible:

It [the market] was the place where one-hundred-and-one social and personal transactions went on; where news was passed, rumour and gossip flew around, politics was (if ever) discussed in the inns or wine-shops round the market-square. The market was the place where the people, because they were numerous, felt for a moment that they were strong (Thompson 1971, 135).

Crowds thus depend upon material-discursive arrangements – the market and the public square as spaces of visibility, speech and action – and are transformed by changing spatial

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and material configurations. The shift from crowds to publics or from crowds to class is underpinned by these changing material, social, and historical conditions. What can the re-emergence of crowds tell us about digital markets? Are digital markets new spaces of congregation that attenuate the impersonality of modern markets?

Digital markets are only partially driven by money, never just spaces of monetised exchange, and crowdsourcing has only recently involved money. Digital markets are also constituted as spaces of love and enjoyment, of emotion and pleasure, rather than spaces of commodity

exchange. 'Affective labour' and crowds are intimately connected, as crowds are associated with affective contagion. However, the affective labour exchanged on digital markets is less like housework, as Fuchs (2014) argues. Although often unpaid and mobi-

*What can the re-emergence of crowds tell us about digital markets? Are digital markets new spaces of congregation that attenuate or the impersonality of modern markets?*

lising emotions, crowdsourcing both exceeds and reproduces the isolation of housework.

Crowdsourcing harnesses 'love' to the ideological project of the nation or that of business creativity, innovation and collaboration. Crowds are hailed to contribute to cultural heritage activities because of their love for national heritage. Funds are generally sparse in the heritage world, so utilising crowd knowledge becomes a necessity in ambitious projects to add value to one's own heritage assets. In 2007, for instance, the National Library of Australia began to digitise out-of-copyright newspapers. It used crowds to help correct OCR (optical character recognition) mistakes, and others followed in large numbers and analysed millions of lines of text (Holley 2010). Digital crowds supplement the work of computers. The National Library of Australia had to use crowds because computers could not deal with the OCR. This pattern is repeated in all digital crowd activities, which always supplement the work of computers.

Digital markets rely on this assemblage of crowds and computers, through which new value emerges. Museums can exploit the love for cultural heritage to add value to their collections. Therefore, crowds become effective producers of digital value. Yet, when crowds enter the digital space of the museum, they are neither workers nor the people. They are a simultaneously disconnected and dispersed multitude, whose love for culture is invoked in a move to entice 'free labour'. The museum as part of cultural economies of exchange is effaced, while digital crowds become a cheap or free workforce and supporters of the museum brand. While they are hailed as a collectivity that exceeds the alienation of individualism, in practice crowds are constituted as the sum of disconnected individuals.

The library or museum appears not to be part of a market and the crowds appear to be an interested public rather than a labour force or political subjects. Although digital markets promise to integrate crowds across spatial distance easily, crowds do not congregate easily. Rather, crowds enter digital markets through individualisation as consumers-producers of value. The 'affective labour' they engage in collectivises them through the contagion of love: of the nation, of work, of museums, of creativity and so on. Love is thus temporally distanced in a dematerialisation of spatiality. For modern crowds temporal co-presence was constitutive of the very possibility of action: 'The crowd is momentous, it marks an event' (Brighenti 2011). The event of the crowd is different from cumulative time that crowds are supposed to 'give' to various projects. In the digital world, crowds do not need to be co-present.

Assemblages that mobilise crowd and machine labour work through spatial and temporal dispersion and disconnection, with labour needing to be accumulated only at particular moments and in different spaces. As one of the business manuals on crowdsourcing notes, 'while many businesses will see [crowds] simply as finding more effective and efficient ways to perform existing business functions, an increasing proportion of companies will start basing their core business model on crowds' (Dawson and Byngghall 2012, 183). Crowds collaborate as part of an emerging larger business infrastructure that supports new kinds of production and consumption of digital value. They are dispersed and distributed and can supplement in this way the things computers cannot do. As an outsourcing practice, the substitution of computer intelligence by crowd intelligence is hidden from the outside world. If the crowds work smoothly, their service seems as automated as a computer service. Digital crowds are thus 'invisible crowds' (Canetti 1987[1960]), the spirits whose presence is felt but who never come into full political existence or visibility. Their existence in cloud-crowd assemblages relegates them to a sub-political life.

### **De/politicising crowds**

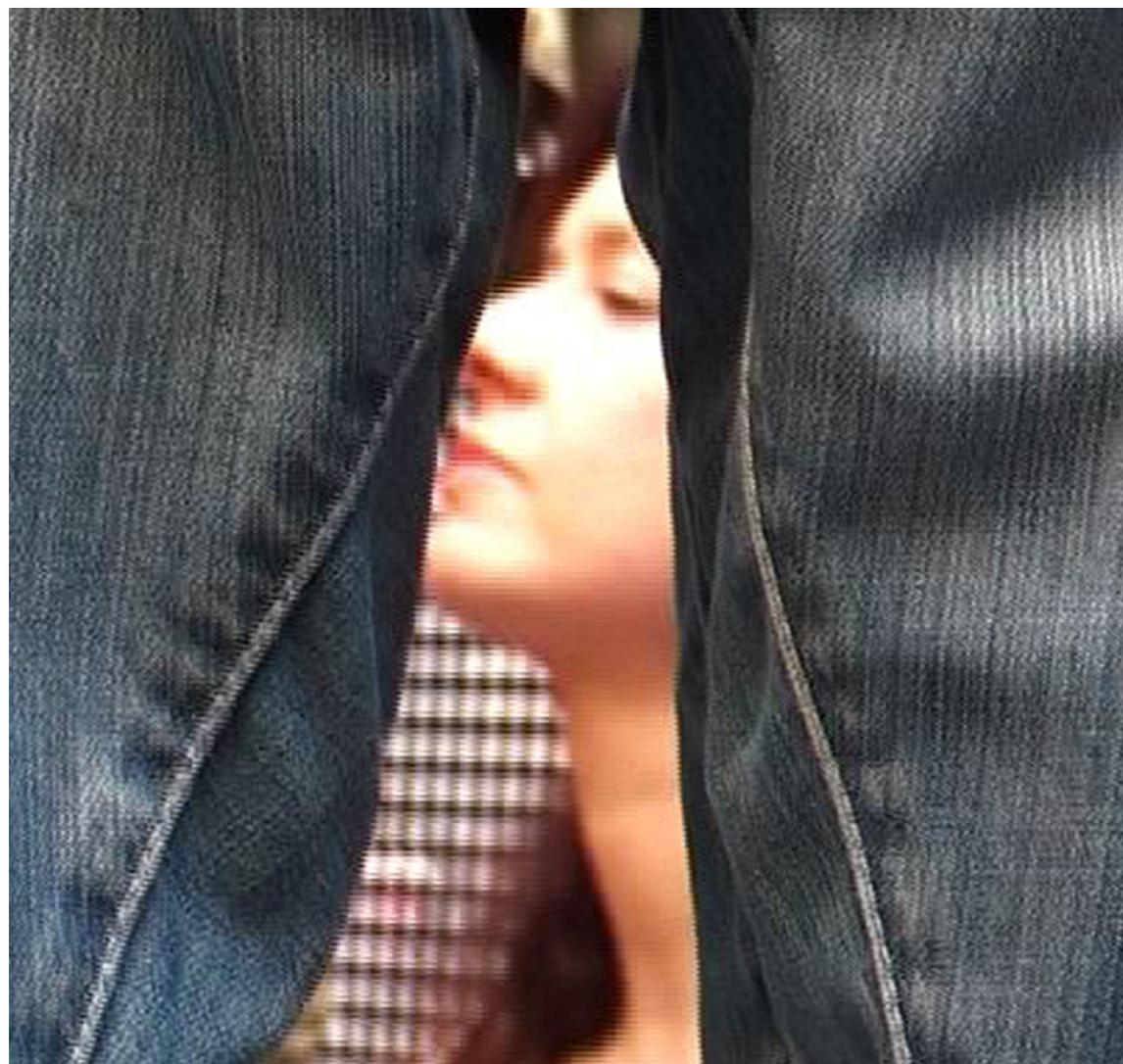
Neither labour force, nor political subjects, rendered invisible in the new abodes of digital production, crowds appear thoroughly depoliticised, while being hailed as producers of value. Their emotions captured and 'free labour' extracted, crowds are separated from the political promise of collective power. Yet, can these new forms of digital exploitation give rise to political grievance and collective action?

Nowhere does the exploitation of dispersed crowds become more obvious than in the dominating commercial crowd environment, Amazon Mechanical Turk. It pays crowd-workers small amounts of money for completing so-called Human Intelligence Tasks. It has liberated itself from the political promise in collective intelligence and makes the crowd a purely economic option. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a marketplace where dispersed crowds can be employed by digital companies in order to supplement computer-generated labour. They are enrolled for particular tasks – from creating metadata to tagging images – and most often paid under the minimum wage. Fort (2011) asks whether the 'dream come true' of 'hobby workers' supporting global digital production has become sour and the Turk's 'gold mine' is in truth a 'coal mine'. Love and pleasure, hailed by the world of cultural markets, are seldom the reason why Turk crowds stick with the Amazon work:

The observed mean hourly wages for performing jobs in the MTurk system is below US \$2. However, money is an important motivation for a majority of the Turkers (20% use MTurk as their primary source of income, and 50% as their secondary source of income), and leisure is important for only a minority (30%) (Fort, Adda, and Cohen 2011).

Basic labour rights also seem to disappear quickly for the global crowd. There is, for instance, no guarantee of payment after the job and there are no benefits. Moreover, Amazon has managed to evade minimum wage requirements in particular countries. Once Amazon had changed its general payment policies for Turkers, the demographics of crowds have also been changing (Ross et al. 2010). Worker-crowds come now more and more from countries outside the USA, mainly from India. Furthermore, they participate not in order to kill time and enjoy themselves, but to earn money as their primary or secondary source of income. Given the intensification of the digital exploitation of crowds, what remains of the political promise that 'the crowd destabilizes existing power structures, creates a momentary equality and freedom, and in that sense empowers the individual in a common act' (Borch 2009, 285)?

Digital markets seem to have de-activated the politics of crowd-events, as Amazon Mechnani









cal Turk 'individuates by design; workers are independent by default' (Irani and Silberman 2013, 619). The politicisation of digital crowds has focused on the dynamics of in/visibility designed into digital technologies. Hidden away under the appearance of computer-generated work, crowds have been increasingly rendered visible only through the design of new infrastructures for visibility. Turker Nation, an online forum for Turkers, (<http://turkernation.com>) has a hall of shame of the worst jobs. The Turkopticon, a web application and browser add-on, allows workers to evaluate their relationship to the Mechanical Turk employers and share this evaluation with others (Irani and Silberman 2013). Unlike other online fora, the Turkopticon is designed around the problem of political (in)visibility and aims to create a digital space of solidarity and mutual aid. Workers do not only post reviews of the employers and thereby make their existence visible, but are fully engaged in the maintenance and repair of the system. However, Irani and Silberman recognise the absence of a global grievance that can constitute a crowd event. Yet, the production of temporal and spatial conditions of coming and being together in the digital world harbours the promise of a digital crowd event that is at least no longer impossible.

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# Spazi affollati, spazi incazzati I commenti su YouTube a Salò di Pier Paolo Pasolini

**Alberto Brodesco**

La più famosa scena del film dei fratelli Marx *Una notte all'opera* (*A Night at the Opera*, Sam Wood, 1935) mostra la cabina di una nave che diventa sempre più stretta mano a mano che si riempie di gente. Nessun individuo preso singolarmente è di troppo, ognuno svolge il suo ruolo prestabilito – ospite, addetto alle pulizie, caldaista, manicurista, cameriere; ma si produce presto un problema di densità. Le interazioni tra i personaggi e lo spazio che li contiene si fanno eccessive. La cabina diviene affollata, un ambiente ristretto che impedisce il movimento e il respiro. Filmato da una macchina da presa che svolge la funzione di quarta parete, lo spazio perde progressivamente la sua tridimensionalità. L'inquadratura assume la forma di un puzzle umano composto di pezzi che non combaciano.

In molti ambienti web avviene un processo equivalente. La volontà di partecipare a una discussione attorno a un oggetto crea un particolare tipo di spazio contratto, denso di persone, idee, parole. Prendiamo ad esempio la ricezione di *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) di Pier Paolo Pasolini da parte degli utenti di YouTube<sup>1</sup>. In generale, le caratteristiche dell'opera mettono a dura prova lo spettatore e lo costringono a riflettere sulle sue reazioni emotive, intellettuali e cognitive. Anche per questo la proposizione di sequenze ("clip") di *Salò* crea presto nei commenti uno spazio digitale affollato – fitto di pareri, controversie, ragionamenti, insulti. Lunghissimi thread si incatenano l'uno con l'altro, producendo un addensamento di opinioni opposte che sgomitano per trovare visibilità.

Come spesso accade su YouTube i commenti più apprezzati (numero di "mi piace") sono ironici o sarcastici – ad esempio quelli che descrivono *Salò* come un film per famiglie o lo consigliano a personaggi pubblici su cui circolano leggende metropolitane a proposito di una loro presunta inclinazione per la coprofagia. Sono numerosi, inoltre, i riferimenti ai temi dell'attualità politica. Si dibatte poi sull'"artisticità" del film e di conseguenza sulla definizione stessa di arte cinematografica. Ma la contrapposizione più classica è tra chi giudica il film "malato" ("sick") e chi lo difende. Coloro che lo giudicano malato partono dal presupposto che non ci si possa spingere "così in là" in termini di rappresentazione. Le ragioni in base alle quali viene conferita questa patente hanno a che fare con l'esagerazione di Pasolini nel mostrare scene che poteva solamente suggerire.

Torna inoltre con una certa frequenza il motivo dell'omosessualità dell'autore, interpretata

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<sup>1</sup> Questo stesso tema è al centro del capitolo IX del mio *Sguardo, corpo, violenza. Sade e il cinema* (Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2014). In questo articolo analizzo la questione da un punto di vista diverso, approfittando del suggerimento offerto dal focus monografico de *lo Squaderno*.

talvolta anch'essa come una "malattia" che si estenderebbe sui contenuti e sul punto di vista del film, rendendolo "innaturale" o "deviante". La degenerazione di cui *Salò* viene accusato si ripercuoterebbe poi, secondo questa lettura, sugli stessi spettatori che difendono il film, spesso invitati a "farsi curare". Evidentemente si tratta di un'accusa che provoca la paralisi di ogni dialettica. Ad essa non si può replicare se non con affermazioni che salgono di tono. Come consueto su YouTube, le discussioni degenerano in insulti personali.

Seguiamo più nel dettaglio alcuni di questi *thread*. Il clip su cui ci concentriamo è "Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma - Il riso"<sup>2</sup>. Il video, della durata di 15 secondi, riprende una "battuta" del personaggio del banchiere interpretato da Aldo Valletti:

- Carlo, metti la dita così. Sei capace di dire "non posso mangiare il riso" tenendo le dita così?
- Non posso mangiare il riso.
- E allora mangia la merda.

YouTube assume nei commenti la forma di un nastro in loop: questo frammento di dialogo viene continuamente trascritto, rilanciato, ribadito. Per districare uno dei fili dalla matassa della discussione partiamo da un'affermazione dell'utente dal nickname *porosimetro*, che scrive nel suo commento:

il suo messaggio mi è chiaro ma sono i mezzi con cui lo trasmette che non mi piacciono! al cattivo gusto c'è un limite...altrimenti si potrebbe trasmettere qualunque roba....anche un film porno in una scuola elementare tanto per scandalizzare i benpensanti....no????<sup>3</sup>

Questo commento attira l'attenzione di *qwertyzupoi*, che gli risponde: "hahahah ti sei scandalizzato, non ti piace?". La replica di *porosimetro* alza il tono dello scontro, restringendo, come nella cabina dei Marx, lo spazio di movimento verbale: "ci vuole ben altro per scandalizzarmi! io guardo i film porno con gli animali....però sto film mi fa cagare! e le tue risate sono tipiche di un truzzetto con la mamma troia!". *porosimetro* introduce nella discussione, come metro di giudizio, un sottogenere cinematografico, la pornografia zoofila, che serve tanto a ribadire la sua imperturbabilità o il suo *machismo*, quanto ad affermare che *Salò* supera in nequizia generi più o meno unanimemente considerati devianti. In coda al messaggio, l'insulto personale chiude la porta a ogni controreplica e al contempo la incentiva.

Si inserisce nella discussione *wtx1979able*, che dedica a *porosimetro* un commento piuttosto efficace: "l'obiettivo del film non è scandalizzarti ma dirti che tu sei come l'animale che tu guardi nei tuoi film porno.". Secondo *wtx1979able* il commento di *porosimetro* conferma le tesi di *Salò* sulla deumanizzazione come caratteristica del potere consumistico. Il successivo commento di *Mc MrMerda* ritorna sul tema dello scandalo: "scandalizzare è un diritto, essere scandalizzati un piacere, chi rifiuta di essere scandalizzato è il cosiddetto moralista, andate a fare i moralisti da un'altra parte Grande Pier Paolo Pasolini!". *Andrea Prometeo* contesta questa affermazione: "scandalizzare è la cosa più facile e la mossetta di ogni pseudo-x alla frutta". Interviene di nuovo *porosimetro*, tornando a insultare chi si ostina a difendere l'opera pasoliniana: "mi fa più scandalo vedere quanti coglioni lo venerano e ammirino i suoi film! Ahah".

Di fronte a questa folla virtuale sempre più minacciosa, *Cinemanfan* sente il bisogno di un richiamo all'ordine: "COMPORTATEVI DA PERSONE ADULTE E RESPONSABILI E CANCELLATE TUTTI I COMMENTI NEI QUALI VI OFFENDETE. SAREBBE UN SEGNO DI MATURITA'". Si allinea a questa tesi *paulbest2350*, auspicando il ritorno a un rappacificante deserto digitale: "Mi sembra che stiate esagerando e che tu abbia passato il limite. Fossi in voi cancellerei tutto. Bye".

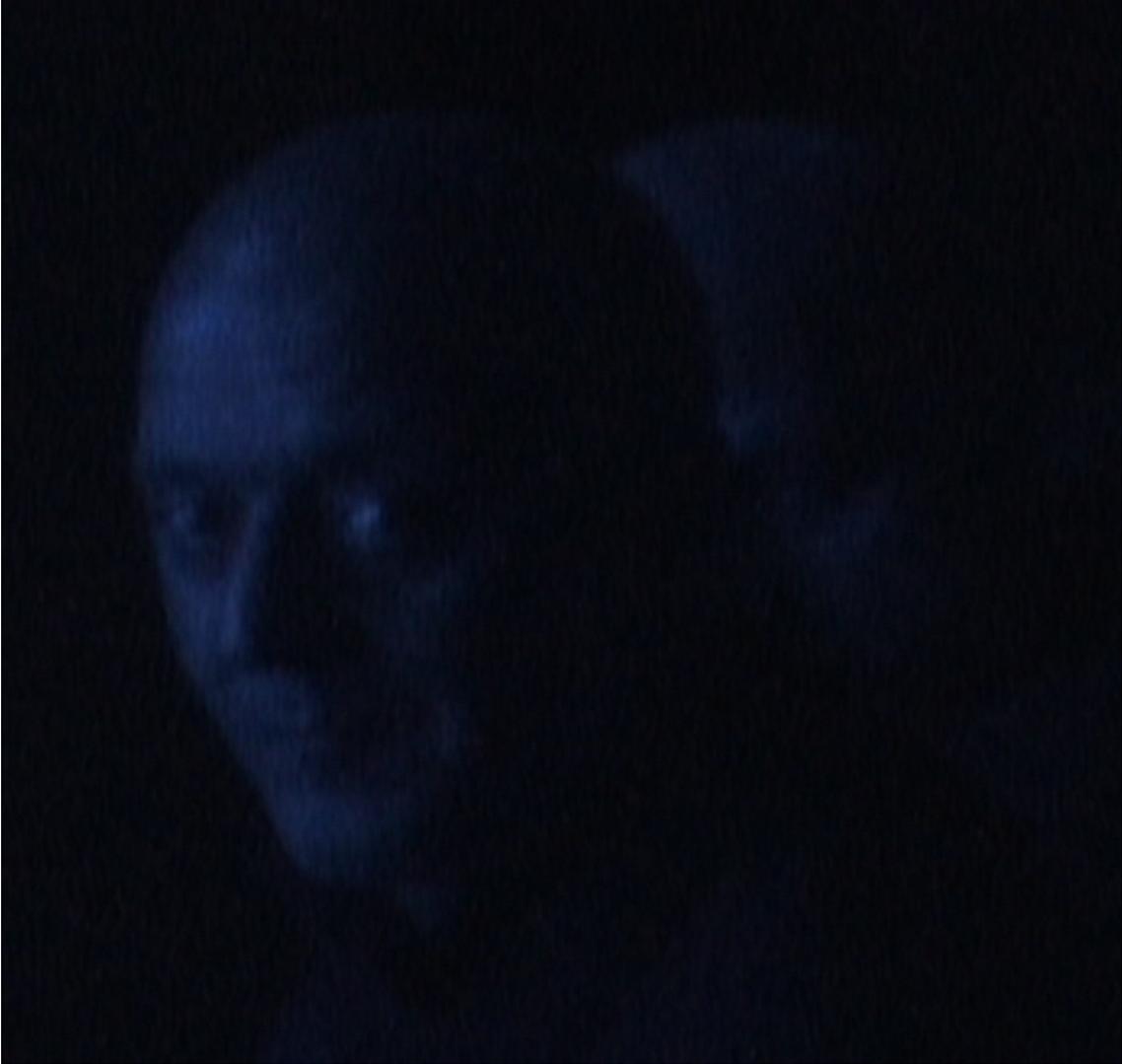
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2 Caricato da *enigmista0* il 6 giugno 2007 su [www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2XzE2rgTG4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2XzE2rgTG4), il frammento ha ottenuto, al 24 luglio 2014, 474.407 visualizzazioni e 398 commenti, principalmente in italiano.

3 Riportiamo testualmente le citazioni da YouTube, senza censure e senza correggere refusi o errori.







paragone, di modi per ricondurre il film di Pasolini al già noto o all'accessibile, nel tentativo di trovare riparo allo spaesamento e al disagio. Il razzismo, il machismo e l'omofobia sono tutti strumenti che i commentatori avversi a *Salò* mettono in campo per denigrare l'opera.

Geert Lovink scrive di meccanismi di "infantilizzazione automatica" che occorrono sui SNS<sup>5</sup>. Lo spazio finisce per essere gremito di una folla intesa nella sua connotazione più ostile, un mob rissoso e aggressivo. Il meccanismo: commento aspro -> repliche insultanti -> controepplica che alza il livello di violenza verbale -> degenerazione della discussione, si crea infatti anche davanti a oggetti meno controversi di *Salò*. Sfidando la banalità o l'eccesso di semplificazione vogliamo indicare almeno tre elementi che contribuiscono a favorire o incentivare tale tasso di violenza verbale. Intanto, molti di questi spazi virtuali permettono di esprimersi mantenendo l'anonimato e in apparente assenza di autorità repressive – filtri, moderatori o censori. Il potere di controllo della Rete stessa, altrettanto anonimo, non è stato ancora introiettato come tale<sup>6</sup>. In secondo luogo, la necessità di gridare o sgomitare per trovare spazio fra la folla è figlia di alcune caratteristiche ontologiche o McLuhaniane del web 2.0: la "cultura dell'algoritmo" ("the ways in which computers, running complex mathematical formulae, engage in what's often considered to be the traditional work of culture: the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas") e la conseguente logica del ranking e della competizione, che premia il numero di visualizzazioni, "mi piace", condivisioni, retweet...<sup>8</sup> Le possibilità di espressione offerte dai SNS servono infine da valvola di sfogo per una frustrazione sociale che in passato trovava altre forme di espressione e di affollamento (proteste in spazi urbani, cortei, scioperi, etc.)<sup>9</sup>. Il contesto di discussione intorno ai testi (post, articoli, video) diventa così bidimensionale, una flatland che, come la cabina dei Marx, cancella ogni profondità. La sequenza di *Una notte all'opera* si conclude con una signora che da fuori apre la porta, causando la rovinosa caduta nel corridoio di tutti gli occupanti della cabina.

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5 G. Lovink, "The Art of Watching Databases. Introduction to the Video Vortex Reader", in G. Lovink e S. Niederer (a cura), *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to YouTube*, Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2008, pp. 9-12.

6 Su YouTube come in altri SNS le autorità repressive sono i "pari", gli altri utenti che possono "segnalare" i contenuti all'interno di un sistema di delazione partecipativo. Il meccanismo istituzionale di sorveglianza di YouTube è invece dedito a scandagliare il sito in cerca di violazioni di copyright – anche qui, con una precisa gerarchia di priorità: la vigilanza sui *Simpson* è molto più attenta che su *Salò*.

7 T. Striplas, intervistato da G. Granieri: <https://medium.com/futurists-views/algorithmic-culture-culture-now-has-two-audiences-people-and-machines-2bdaa404f643>. V. anche <http://culturedigitally.org/2012/02/what-is-an-algorithm/>; D. Beer, "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and technological unconscious", *New Media & Society*, n. 11, 2009, pp. 985-1002; A. Brodesco, "Lo spleen di Hollywood. Lo spettatore flâneur nell'era dell'algoritmo", in F. Zecca (a cura), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2012, pp. 205-218.

8 Cfr. K. Peters e A. Seier, "Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube", in P. Snickars e P. Vonderau (a cura), *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, 2009, p. 201; A.M. Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 96-97.

9 Una tesi comparabile è sostenuta da Wu Ming rispetto al ruolo conservativo (o sedativo) svolto dal webbofilo M5S nella politica italiana: "LM5s amministra la mancanza di movimenti radicali in Italia. [...] Nonostante le apparenze e le retoriche rivoluzionarie, crediamo che negli ultimi anni il Movimento 5 stelle sia stato un efficiente difensore dell'esistente. Una forza che ha fatto da 'tappo' e stabilizzato il sistema", <http://www.internazionale.it/news/italia/2013/02/26/il-movimento-5-stelle-ha-difeso-il-sistema-2>.

# New media sociofugal spaces

**Andrea Mubi  
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In a classic piece, Sommer (1967: 654) once defined sociofugal space as ‘a place where people typically try to avoid one another’. And the point is that – because of environmental spatial characteristics – people cannot successfully avoid each other, or can do so only to a limited extent. Typically, we are dealing with open public places, where the first come cannot prevent others from arriving afterwards. Under these conditions, space is often unwillingly shared. Consequently, every new arrival raises the thorny issue of the ‘critical distance’ between two or more co-specific *socii* (members of the same species), together with the question of how each socius is going to make space for himself or herself inside the shifting geometry that each new socius introduces in a context of inter-visibility (or, more precisely, in the *element* of visible).

In such cases, not simply is the endlessly movable threshold between sociability and unsociability put at test, but the very unsociable option requires a basic degree of sociability. As we know, the necessity to communicate socially one’s own unsociability can at times be quite burdensome to individuals. Yet what is arguably most interesting is that, at bottom, the tag ‘sociofugal’ designates not only a tension, but an hendiadys – there is no way to have the one without the other. To put it differently, not only do society and flight entertain a long-lasting dialogue, they are actually and essentially entwined. An entwinement best revealed by how social animals – and humans among them – make of a certain space a ‘territory’ properly understood. Indeed, territories come into existence every time a relational program or scheme is embodied and acted in an environment.

In every territory also lies inscribed the mystery of crowding. For it is impossible to define overcrowding from a merely physical point of view, independently, that is, from the feeling of being in a crowded space. This is why the (in)famous 1950s behavioural experiments with caged rats and mice overcrowding carried out by ethologists such as John B. Calhoun (1962) fall short of fully taking into account in their design, besides rats’ behaviour, rats’ feelings (consequently, in the view of a ‘behavioural sink’ too much of our own feelings ends up being projected upon rats). A space is crowded when each socius feels in a crowd; but, following Elias Canetti’s (1978[1960]) insight, a veritable crowd formation really designates a reversal point of such situation: there is a subtle yet essential gap between being *in* a crowd and being *a* crowd. Whereas being in a crowd corresponds to a badly tolerated excess, being a crowd corresponds to the establishment of a new measure of toleration.

Perhaps, however, the view that the latter figure – the crowd – follows the former situation – crowded space – (an idea somehow entailed by Canetti’s notion of *discharge*) is just an

Social multiplicities, territories and visibilities are at the forefront of Mubi’s preoccupations.

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optical illusion. We have evoked the feeling of being in a crowded space. But, how does a certain feeling about the environment spread within a multiplicity of *socii*? Does not, after all, the circulation of similar 'environmental' feelings already presuppose the existence of a crowd formation, albeit an unnamed and unshaped one? (*Whose* feeling is this? What is a feeling, if not something that is *shared*?) Canetti taught us that a crowd is not a mere summation of individuals. Yet, the seemingly reversed view, namely that the crowd is an entity or special creature in which individuals melt, is likewise imprecise, not to say flawed. To overcome this conceptual impasse,

*From this perspective, it may turn out that the becoming-crowd of a multiplicity of socii is but a correlative process to individuation, the becoming-individual of a singularity of socii*

I have advanced the following hypothesis (Brighenti 2014): once we elaborate a sufficiently radical understanding of these two notions, a crowd may prove to be not so different from an individual – the hypothesis, that is, that we

are observing the same phenomenon from two different perspectives.

In earnest, from everyday experience we know that we are not always individuals, nor are we always individuals under the same respects and to the same extent. Our degree of individuality varies widely when we are engaged in a passionate conversation, when we are absent-mindedly walking down the street, when we fall ill, when we dream, and when we attend a gig. The process of individuation is one which, with Gilbert Simondon (2007[1958]), might be defined as one of *prise de forme*, or form-taking. There are *degrees* of individuation and *moments* of individuation, which are tightly related to a whole *human energetics* capable of creating those moments and attaining those degrees (incidentally, plants – essentially thanks to their scissile nature, and let's not forget that we also vegetate – could provide us with great lessons in the variability of individuation).

From this perspective, it may turn out that the becoming-crowd of a multiplicity of *socii* is but a correlative process to individuation, the becoming-individual of a singularity of *socii*. The reason is not so much that there can be collective individuations, in addition to personal individuations. Rather, the pivotal point is that even personal individuation unfolds in a crowded environment. Nobody could ever grant that being an individual is an easy job. Becoming-individual passes through bringing a mobile multiplicity of bits and pieces (often, reluctant *socii*) together. In short, the individual is made of crowds. Certainly, this is just a sketchy working hypothesis, which needs to be further developed and tested. Who knows, for instance, whether or not it could be helpful to understand what happens with the new media, and especially social media platforms.

Indeed, which are new media sociofugal spaces? In environments defined by high connectivity, the issue of overcrowding – understood in the first place as a feeling about the environment rather than as a numerical density – acquires a certain importance. If connectivity is but a contemporary technologically powered alias for sociability, then it is not surprising to find in today's connected environments the sort of animosity Alberto Brodesco (2014) has documented in the case of a YouTube commentaries struggle. In particular, Brodesco has detected a spiralling dynamic that stretches from harsh commentary, through insulting reply, to verbal violence, assault and, eventually, stalemate.

Thus, it seems as if comments are *dipoles*. Because they are written to be read – provocative comments particularly so – they certainly contain a sociable pole. This is the observe

situation of a sociofugal one: instead of communicating socially one's own unsociability, here people are actually communicating unsocially their sociability. Yet the contemptuous comment also already appears as a little war machine equipped with a strengthened unsociable or fugal pole. Conversation might not be a good model for these events (hence, the impression of 'asphyxia' recorded by Brodesco). Indeed, each comment contains a more or less explicit elicitation of a reactive comment, yet simultaneously the overall configuration trumps any possible conversational format in the moment when the initial comment is snowed under a myriad of others that convey increasingly less meaning. It is just like the escalating production of a bacterial colony doomed to die out due to the rapid exhaustion of all available resources. The dominant paradigm is a reactive one, and the confrontational spiral is but one among the possible topologies formed by these cascading, enchainned events which proceed towards a point of catastrophe.

We thus have an intense circulatory movement and, simultaneously, the sense of going nowhere. At each moment, and often within the same span of comments, critical distances between the *socii* are awkwardly established, arrogantly challenged, and frantically abolished – a perfect *in vivo* illustration of the endlessly movable threshold between sociability and unsociability, as well as the simultaneous progressing of the working of individuation and the correlative working of crowding feelings. How could the multiple territorialisations that ensue from such unstable yet concatenated dipolar structures be analysed? In my view, much remains to be done to develop suitable categories and notions to this aim.

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**Io Squaderno 33**  
***Crowded spaces***

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