GERTRUD KOCH

Benjamin's Mass at the Cinema

With the introduction of letterpress printing, if not even earlier, we can speak of media in which mechanical reproduction enables the generation of networks of communication on a mass scale that can function on an anonymous basis. With this genealogy in mind, we can nonetheless consider the cinema the first genuine *mass* medium to the extent that it consciously addresses and engages the masses as such. The established discourses on the masses paint a diffuse and shapeless crowd; lest the masses turn into a mob, they must be led, organized, channeled. Their power, which is universally acknowledged and described as primarily affective, must be ordered and tended—whether by the 'good shepherd' or the authoritarian leader, the pliable masses are led by an external will to which they must submit. The analogy between this picture and the misogynistic stereotype is clear. The emancipated masses cease to be masses, become a community, the proletariat, a nation, an electorate. The masses are always the other, "those folks all over the country," as politicians like to say when they are worried about elections and voter turnouts. In the 19th century, writers still directly lamented the feminization of the reading public: Madame Bovary, an avid

reader in Flaubert's novel, is suspected to be both a pernicious heroine and a perverted reader. The reasoning public of the bourgeois salon, thus the hypothesis of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, is superseded by the expansion of the mass media, which no longer form and inform a homogeneous public. The masses, both as a subject of address and as an agent that defies synoptic comprehension, become a visual topos:

> At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population explosion was described by contemporaries in terms of the social form of "the masses." Even then, the phenomenon was not an entirely new one. Well before Le Bon became interested in the "psychology of the mass," nineteenth-century novelists were already well acquainted with mass concentrations of people in cities, housing blocks, factory buildings, offices, and barracks, as well as with the mass mobilization of workers and immigrants, demonstrators, strikers, and revolutionaries. But it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that massive flows of people, mass organizations, and mass actions began to appear intrusive enough to give rise to the vision of the "revolt of the masses" (Ortega y Gasset).[1]

The masses become an aesthetic phenomenon that is impossible to ignore; from now on, however latent, they will be always on the minds of those who seek to describe life in the big cities and to transpose art into life and take it out into the street. Yet the transformation of the masses into a vision or, in Benjamin, a phantasmagoria must first and foremost create the possibility of a vantage point from which they can be savored as a theatrical spectacle and illusion. It is from this point that the masses become aesthetic.[2]

The aesthetics of the masses in this sense emerges as early as the late 18th century, in the grand portraits of the revolutionary masses during the French revolution. Once this iconography has been established, the masses themselves become an aesthetic motif—yet even where they recede into the background are they active as a suppressed ground. Walter Benjamin unfolds this development in a triangular constellation: E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Baudelaire. The series begins with the tale "My Cousin's Corner Window," which E.T.A. Hoffmann, already paralyzed, dictated in 1822; it was to be his last. It narrates a visit to an ailing man, whose attic apartment has a corner window that surveys the market square. It is at this window that the cousin takes up his observer's post, becoming the director of the hustle and bustle of the masses, which engender in him all sorts of narratives. The

visitor remarks on the view from the window:

> The view was indeed strange and surprising. The entire market seemed like a single mass of people squeezed tightly together, so that one would have thought that an apple thrown into it would never reach the ground.[3]

Here, the masses indeed become a "strange" image, for the theatrical gaze fuses an aesthetic aspect with a categorically different conception of mass: that of physics. It is this physical and impenetrable mass that appears as an extended, opaque, and viscous substance. This image of the masses, which the cousin's visitor finds "tiring," fearing even that it "might give over-sensitive people a slight feeling of giddiness," could not be further removed from the cousin's own gaze, to which the masses appear as a generic form out of which an infinite number of stories can be unfolded. As he lectures his visitor in glowing words:

> Cousin, cousin! I now see clearly that you haven't the tiniest spark of literary talent. You lack the first prerequisite for treading in the footsteps of your worthy paralysed cousin: an eye that can really see. The market down there offers you nothing but the sight of a motley, bewildering throng of people animated by meaningless activity. Ho, ho, my friend! I can derive from it the most varied scenery of town life, and my mind, an honest Callot, or a modern Chodowiecki, dashes off a whole series of sketches, some of them very bold in their outlines. Come on cousin! Let me see if I can't teach you at least the rudiments of the art of seeing. Look directly down into the street – here are my field-glasses – do you see the somewhat strangely dressed person with a large shopping-basket on her arm who is deep in conversation with a brush-maker [...][4]

And so stories upon stories proliferate wildly; one, for instance, begins with a "bright yellow dot" that "forces its way through the crowd [*Masse*]."[5]

The aesthetics of the masses that begins to take shape here constitutes its object as a theatrical event; it is not by accident that it takes place, in Hoffmann's tale, in front of the theater's doors and on the market square. In brief words, the astonished visitor summarizes the effects these stories about a visible object of the outside world have on him:

> It may be, dear cousin, that not one word of all your conjectures is true, but as I look at the old women your vivid description sounds so

> plausible that I am compelled to believe it, willy-nilly.[6]

The masses provide the material out of which the theatrical illusion is fashioned; the aesthetic gaze on the masses is what tautens their factual physical presence into the spring that propels us into the fiction of narrative and hence into illusion, with its peculiar status, its 'compulsion to believe.' The masses form the ground on which the figural image rises.

The second historic piece of literature that has given shape to this ground-figure relationship in an aesthetics of the masses is Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), in which a man, sitting at a coffeehouse window, seeks distraction from his worries by observing the masses that are in constant motion outside his window:

> At this particular period of the evening I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without.[7]

In his great essay on Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin recalls that Baudelaire translated this story and points out the similarity to Baudelaire's famous poem "À une passante." Benjamin sketches the genealogy from Hoffmann via Poe to Baudelaire as a process of growing condensation and interiorization: "In *Tableaux parisiens* the secret presence of a crowd is demonstrable almost everywhere."[8] "The masses," Benjamin writes, "were an agitated veil, and Baudelaire views Paris through this veil."[9] I read Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire and on Paris decidedly as contributions to an aesthetics of the masses, one that is predicated on their becoming visible but then renders them a 'ground figure,' a form suspended between invisibility and a presence that crowds into the image. The masses that, as an 'agitated veil,' become the medium of an aesthetic perception are, I would argue, already a fusion of the image of the revolutionary masses during the French revolution with the physical concept of mass. For this latter concept already contains *in nuce* an aesthetic motif that we can read in conjunction with Kant's conception of the sublime in natural beauty: the opacity of the impenetrable mass that strikes the eye as "strange and surprising" is the description of a natural spectacle defined by the matrix of magnitude and density. The transformation of the beautiful of nature into artistic beauty proceeds via a figure-ground form. Where the masses have entered into visibility and moved from the rank of inert physical

mass to that of a subject, they occupy the modern double position that has established them as a concealed agent and an open addressee. The political mass has been supplemented by the aesthetic one. Hoffmann's tale concludes, after the lesson on aesthetic perception, with an assertion of the political figuration: the market square itself is ultimately established as the political site of the recognition of difference in liberal exchange, a site that must be defended against the authoritarian tendencies among the reactionaries of the day. A turn to which Benjamin will give yet another radical twist by arresting this exchange in the commodity fetish and displacing, with Baudelaire, the masses onto the boulevard and into the arcades.

The modern political theory of the masses is founded in Spinoza, and it is to his concept of *multitudo* that the most recent theories of the masses, such as Hardt and Negri's, refer—a reference that is, in this particular case, only partly justified, as Spinoza's vision aims primarily at the inseparability of the state and the masses and not at a bipolar relationship between the two. Spinoza, turning Hobbes on his head, makes the ability of the masses to develop collective affects precisely the basis, the force that sustains the state—which, in Hobbes, is a sort of damage-control mechanism of human nature, since the latter, by itself, seeks not communion but combat. Spinoza's theory of the affectively excitable masses explicitly draws on the Scholastic idea of man as a "social animal." Yet the masses, tied together by affect, though capable of productive socialization, require that purely formal reason be presented to them in an imaginative medium. The medium of religion engenders the imagery out of which those narratives grow that define the life of the community in its concrete details:

> Ceremonies, by virtue of their specific imaginative form, can make man confess in all his actions and thoughts that he is subject not to his own but to an alien power; the narratives of Scripture move the masses to the same obedience by teaching them not by means of reason but by invoking experience. This is the force religious ceremonies and texts exercise: they can move man's imagination and thus teach obedience in a pre-rational fashion. Yet as men are of different imaginative capacity, and as different visual traditions shape their imaginations, different cults and narrative beliefs emerge.[10]

It would seem to be an immediate adoption of this Spinozist conception of the affective masses when Sigmund Freud, drawing on LeBon, claims that the masses "[think] in images, which call one another up by association."[11] His assessment of this basis of the masses in the imagination, however, is less

positive than Spinoza's. Hardt/Negri, lending extraordinary emphasis to these features of the masses, elaborate them into the movement of a global *potestas multitudinis* against Empire. The romantic-enthusiastic image they paint of the masses contains a highly aesthetic component; they wish to shift the masses back into visibility, installing them, in a quasi-post-Marxist move, in the position of the class subject, as whose immature and undeveloped precursory stage they ultimately also appear in the Hegelian matrix.

Kracauer, like Benjamin and in contradistinction to Adorno and Horkheimer, stakes his theory on a type of saving critique of a mass culture Adorno and Horkheimer consider 'deceptive,' a critique in which the "Dialectics of the Enlightenment" takes place once more in conjunction with the disenchantment of world and subject so insistently invoked by Freud and Max Weber. At the same time that the conservative *Kulturkritik* recognized in the rise of the masses the Decline of the West, however, this rise rendered the masses the new sovereign. The ambivalent cover illustration of Hobbes's *Leviathan* saw this clearly: the masses superinscribe themselves upon the sovereign just as they themselves become the body politic. The masses became an ambiguous phenomenon, acting, in the eyes of some observers, as a "bad object," the mob or lumpenproletariat that has run rampant in the streets since the French Revolution, while others recognized in them the repressed *alter ego* of the republican elites, the genie in the bottle of democratic sovereignty: how to represent them? The problem of political representation goes hand in hand with that of cultural representation: how are the masses to give rise to a public will? Can the mass, once it has learnt to read itself, speak as well; does it develop a 'culture' in which it represents itself in the way the bourgeoisie was said to represent itself in its art? At the same time, the question of representation becomes central to the efforts to form a theory of democracy, for the question of how the political will and the accompanying process of opinion-formation develops presupposes the transformation of the masses into a public that participates in debate. The blind masses are now to become a participatory public that takes an active interest in, and makes decisions regarding, public affairs, the matters of the *res publica*.

The aesthetics of the masses more strictly conceived, whose fundamental features are delineated in the 19th-century literary documents, continues in a fascinating fashion in the history and the medium of film, where both aspects, the aesthetic and the political masses, converge. The consequence is a double—even a doppelganger-like—modality of film: it is, in its very origins, almost at once an object of the political and the aesthetic avant-gardes. Let

me quote briefly from a historical description that indicates this coincidence of pictorial and political representation.

The visit of the German Kaiser to Vienna provided the occasion for the following observations by Berthold Viertel. At the end of his trip, the Kaiser joined the Austrian monarch to a cinema, where they saw a newsreel in which the Kaiser himself appeared on the screen. Berthold Viertel describes this as an encounter between the *two bodies of the king* that Ernst Kantorowicz would distinguish in his discussion of the symbolic and the biological body of the medieval sovereign:

> I can no longer rid myself of the thought of this horrible doppelgangerdom of representation. [...] High above, in the picture, he performs his high duties, while below, among the spectators, the same person sits, just a human, and takes human delight in the likeness of his rank? Or is he thus merely performing his duties once more? Where does the representation begin, and where does it end? And the people, twice present here and therefore twice happy, cheering along with its own cheers, welcoming its own naïve existence as a people in the mirror. Is not this dangerous? Could not this alarm the people as though it saw its own ghost?[12]

Yet the figure of reflection art produces, what Viertel conjures here as the terror of facing one's own representation, is only one side of the story. The other side is epistemic: without developing an idea of themselves as a collective self, the masses cannot become an agent subject; they must, thus Kracauer's conception in *The Mass Ornament*, acquire the ability to read themselves, which is to say, to face themselves as a sign, rather than disappearing into the ornament they form in accordance with rules that remain opaque. Kracauer's political aesthetics is invested in the cathartic moment of self-recognition in the image, in the difference between being and sign. We can hear in Kracauer's concept of the masses echoes of the tradition that wanted to move the masses to recognize themselves as form and, in this becoming-form, to shed their indeterminate character. So Kracauer remains within the discourse of the dialectical sublation of the masses into a self-determined subject that is then no longer the masses but becomes, depending on an author's political preferences, a 'people,' a 'nation,' a 'class,' or the 'multitude.' This requires that the 'masses' gain a perspective on themselves; they must adopt a vantage point vis-à-vis themselves. The concept of the masses, unless translated into a dialectical evolution of transformation, contains a logical aporia this dialectic

King Vidor, The Crowd

is supposed to 'sublate.'

Yet we should ask whether this aporia might not be overcome in other ways. To the extent that the 'masses' are necessarily defined by their indeterminate size and their expanding and dynamic shapelessness, they defy assignation to any closed form; their margins remain blurry, requiring projection into visibility. The masses, to put my hypothesis succinctly, function as an aesthetic illusion in the sense that they come to the observer's consciousness only as an appearance, a flash-mob of sorts, as the ground from which a figure emerges: as a generic principle. If the masses, as Benjamin's metaphor of the veil suggests, form a medium that enables urbanity to come to the fore, the next question is: which medium in turn mediates the medium that are the masses?

In the cinema, the masses are undeniably given a new medium that accommodates their undefinability. But in which aspect and how does it do so? The literary evocations of the masses I have quoted depict the masses as a 'street picture,' an 'urban landscape' through which the narrative protagonist rambles, his gaze wandering. The lack of direction characteristic of the masses becomes a movement of heaving and surging through the infinitely ramified streets of the 'big' city; the city comes to serve as the medium of the masses, and the masses, as the medium of urbanity, which is defined by the lack of spatial closure. Images of the masses, by contrast, inevitably operate with a *pars pro toto* technique to the extent that the image is constrained by the frame, and the flat expanse of the horizonless masses must be made to fit into the depth of pictorial space. With film's moving images, a medium now appears on the stage that is characterized by fluid shifts of horizon which leave the frame of painting behind. Instead of the frame that definitively circumscribes the extension of the image, the projection screen of the filmic image is regulated by a 'cache' that 'covers' or, literally, 'conceals' something. Christian Metz has described this concealment as follows:

> Film consists of a multitude of images, as well as camera movements, so that the object that was off-screen can reenter the camera's field of view and leave it once more, etc. (that is Bazin's theory of the cache). The off-screen space is subject to an alternating ebb and flow:

> it is off-screen, but it is not located outside the film. Sound and a character's voice moreover enable that character to remain present even while being outside the field of view [...] To summarize, we can say [...] that the cinematic off-screen space is occupied: something incessantly takes place in it of which we know something, and there are innumerable connections to what happens within the picture frame.[13]

The picture on the screen is determined by what is off-screen: by being potentially visible, it incessantly accompanies the viewer's imagination, affecting our imaginative capacity, as it were, from its hiding-place. Metz describes this influence in metaphors of the masses, speaking of a "multitude," of "ebb and flow." Film is here defined by its "movable frame," by "variable and forever renewed selections of detail," by a process of "framing that changes between shots and within the shots themselves."[14] This incessant opening and closing of horizons and spaces conceived in the metaphor of "ebb and flow" bears within it the features of the shapeless masses that, in appearing from out of a 'hiding-place,' behind the "veil," become a figure of the sublime: at once far and close, touching and austere. In their formal structure, the multi-perspectival montages of film are designed to produce an illusionistic evocation of an endless unframing of the world: at its core, we begin to see, this is an aesthetic of the masses. Metz's argument is based on a comparison between film and photography; he also relates both to the formation of fetishes, a reference that I will not pursue further. Metz emphasizes the sheer 'magnitude' of film, the mobilization of "many different perceptions"; he speaks of a "flood wave passing before us" that renders the isolation of any individual picture impossible.[15] If we sever Metz's metaphors from their immediate structural context in a psychoanalytical theory of the fetish and place them in the context of an aesthetic of the masses, his formal descriptions of filmic techniques suddenly turn into metaphors of the masses. Film, in this definition, becomes a medium of the desire for the masses that, while inevitably remaining in the background, flash up on ever new horizons.

Yet this construction restores the masses to their ambiguous status. In the objectivity of film, they are materialized into a motif, into pictorial content; newly enframed, they are confronted with the mass audience as that audience's own image. In many movies, this dimension of mirroring—Berthold Viertel had already addressed it, in the register of anecdote, as an unsettling experience—becomes itself thematic. The images of the masses that have been created over the course of the history of film encompass the entire bandwidth

of forms and formations the masses can adopt in various constellations. Elias Canetti's famous study of the masses elaborates the problem that the concept of the masses itself cannot be referred to a single phenomenon; the masses are empirically found in an infinite variety of forms, each of which implies different attitudes and valuations. This would seem to suggest the conclusion either that 'the masses' is a fairly empty umbrella term used to subsume all instances of large gatherings and movements of crowds; or that we cannot speak of 'the masses' at all since the phenomena covered by the term are in fact unrelated. 'The masses' would then be defined by, and functionally related to, their various specific contexts, and not an independent magnitude. Seen in this perspective, we would have to distinguish the lynch mob, the revolutionary masses, and the masses that are the mass media's audience in functional terms, rather than comprising them under the term 'the masses' as a sort of smallest common denominator. The scholarly literature on film evinces a clear preference for the empirical list; most studies examine different images of the masses as presented by corpora such as genres, the oeuvres of directors, films on certain subjects, etc.[16]

Leni Reifenstahl, Triumph of the Will

Benjamin's evocation of the masses, by contrast, is that of a media-based episteme that occupies the position of a percept as defined by Deleuze, and it gestures back to Benjamin's essay on the Work of Art and the concept of the masses that earlier work proposes. Benjamin links the cinema to the masses on a unified stage. We might even say that the primary interest of film for Benjamin is this possibility it offers of conceiving the masses in a new way. The masses become episteme, percept, and subject at once. The philosophical determination of the masses becomes more than the logically unambiguous definition of a concept: a perennially oscillating movement between the aesthetic contouring of a percept and the affectively charged evocation of a moment in time in which episteme, percept and affect might coincide once more.

In a 1988 interview with Raymond Bellour and François Ewald, Deleuze describes his attitude toward film using a philosophical method that recalls Benjamin's style of thinking:

> Then let's suppose there's a third period when I worked on painting and cinema: images, on the face of it. But I was writing philosophy books. You see, I think concepts involve two other dimensions, percepts and affects. That's what interests me, not images. Percepts aren't perceptions, they're packets of sensations and relations that live on independently of whoever experiences them. Affects aren't feelings, they're becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them (thereby becoming someone else).[17]

To become someone else in living through something also means to undergo further individuation by means of division, to become different from oneself, to become involved in processes of living-on and survival. 'Conceptions' or 'concepts' then no longer designate logical determinations that are meant to identify identities; they are themselves swept along by this process of temporalization that is interwoven with sensations and interrelations. Images, sounds, films can return as philosophy; philosophy can become images, sounds, films.

In Benjamin's essay on the Work of Art, the cinematic masses become a revolutionary subject precisely because they no longer represent a unified subject, nor will they become one in the future. Benjamin's dream is not of the masses turning into the victorious proletariat and thereby leaving indeterminacy behind; to the contrary, to Benjamin's eyes the masses are what Deleuze would describe as a formation of openness and indeterminacy that precisely therein gains the aesthetic and political power to exercise incessant negation.

References:

[1] Jürgen Habermas, "Learning from Catastrophe? A Look Back at the Short Twentieth Century," in *The Postnational Constellation. Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001, 38-57, 39.

[2] This aspect is already explored by Diderot with this conception of the imaginary fourth wall of the theatrical space; only by enabling a clear separation of the space of fiction from the auditorium can it engender effects of immersion and aesthetic illusions that can be experienced as aesthetic pleasure.

[3] E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Des Vetters Eckfenster*, zitiert aus: Digitale Bibliothek, Deutsche Literatur von Lessing bis Kafka, S.91.182 (Konkordanz Hoffmann-PW Bd.6, 745) [Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, Penguin, 379]

[4] Ebenda, S. [Penguin, 380]

[5] Ebenda, S. [Penguin, 380]

[6] Ebenda, S. [Penguin, 383]

[7] Edgar Allen Poe, The Man of The Crowd*,* in: ders., *Poetry, Tales and Selected Essays*, College Editions. The Library of America, S.388 f.

[8] Walter Benjamin, Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire, in ders., *Gesammelte Schriften Bd.I.2*, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, S.621 f. [Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, 323]

[9] A.a.O., S. 622 [*Selected Writings*, 323]

[10] Gunnar Hindrichs , Der Grundgedanke in Spinozas politischer Philosophie, in: Gunnar Hindrichs (HG.), *Die Macht der Menge. Über die Aktualität einer Denkfigur Spinozas*, Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg 2006, p.33

[11] Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII* (1920-1922): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, 65-144, 78.

[12] Quoted from *Hätte ich das Kino,* Sonderausstellungen des Schiller Nationalmuseums Marbach a. N., ed. Bernhard Zeller (Munich: Kösel Verlang, 1976), p. 26. [Trans. DF]

[13] Christian Metz: Foto, Fetisch. In: Herta Wolf (Hg.): *Diskurse der Fotografie*. Frankfurt a. M. 2003, S. 222. The German translation is based on the French manuscript that is not entirely identical with the English version published as "Photography and Fetish" in: *October*, Vol. 34. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 81-90. The translation quoted here is made from the German version.

[14] Ebenda, S. 224

[15] Ebenda, S. 223

[16] A noteworthy book in this context is Lesley Brill's study *Crowds, Power, and Transformation in Cinema*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006, which directly draws on Elias Canetti's typology of the masses; in an appendix, Brill offers a summary of, and extensive commentary on, Canetti's types. Brill's seven analyses examine individual films, groups of works by directors, and motifs that generate very different images of the masses. There has been a recent surge in interest in the masses as an object of film-scholarly scrutiny; see e.g. Michael Tratner, *Crowd Scenes. Movies and Politics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. The collection of essays *Masses et culture de masse dans les années trente*, Régine Robin (ed.), Paris: Les éditions ouvrières, 1991, by contrast, focuses on a specific timeframe, defining the thirties as a hinge decade during which mass movements and directed forms of the public come to be established in different countries and cultures.

[17] Gilles Deleuze, "On Philosophy," in *Negotiations. 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 137. (First in *Magazine littéraire* 257 [September 1988].)