

purse lip square jaw

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On the *mobile vulgus* (Dec 2001)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the Latin *mobile vulgus* means the moveable or excitable crowd.

Canetti (1998) offers an explanation of the ways crowds form, develop, and dissolve, using taxonomies of collective (*masse*) movement as keys to the dynamics of sociality and sociability. And Canetti's crowds are performed as collective multiplicities, actual and virtual, de-differentiated and always already present.

For Canetti (1998:17), the most important occurrence within the crowd is the discharge : "Before this the crowd does not actually exist; it is the discharge which creates it." This moment is one of de-territorialisation, when we are freed from the burdens of distance; but during a discharge the crowd is also an illusion, in danger of dissipating and being re-territorialised and closed. The destructiveness of crowds is an attack on all boundaries, and de-territorialisation makes possible the crossing of boundaries. To this, Canetti (1998:22) adds the eruption : the sudden transition from a closed to open crowd, the crowd overflowing. So the performances that bind the crowd may also push the boundaries of the crowd until it disintegrates.

"The crowd is open so long as its growth is not impeded; it is closed when its growth is limited... The *stagnating* crowd lives for its discharge... the process here starts not with equality but with density... In the *rhythmic* crowd... density and equality coincide from the beginning. Everything here depends on movement" (Canetti 1998:30). The rhythmic, or throbbing crowd is characterised by a specific state of communal excitement: "the means of achieving this state was first of all the rhythm of their feet, repeating and multiplied," not moving, but gathering intensity at one place and creating frenzy (Canetti 1998:31). In this sense, the stagnating (closed) crowd is always becoming the rhythmic (open) crowd.

So where does this leave us? If we were to elaborate a conceit of the *mobile vulgus*, it could simultaneously accommodate multiple metaphors of mobility, through space and time. At a glance, we can define mobility as moveable or excitable; as de-territorialisation, intensity, translation and flow. To this we may also add that mobility belongs to the hybrid collective, to the crowd, and even more specifically, to the itineraries of the common and the mundane, the practices of everyday

life (see De Certeau 1984; De Certeau *et al* 1998). The *mobile vulgus* can also represent the place, or state, or experience of collective recognition, of memory, of the ethic of aesthetics (see Maffesoli 1991).

Perhaps most importantly, a conceit of the *mobile vulgus* can provide a complex, and even contradictory or incomplete, mapping of mobility. After all, this way of understanding mobility is found in the states and practices of liquid modernity itself (Bauman 2000) and the metaphor is already been mobilised as a form of urban tactic (Nold 2001).

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