The sea has a voice, which is very changeable and almost always audible. It is a voice which sounds like a thousand voices, and much has been attributed to it: patience, pain, and anger. But what is most impressive about it is its persistence. The sea never sleeps; by day and by night it makes itself heard, throughout the years and decades and centuries. In its impetus and its rage it brings to mind the one entity which shares these attributes in the same degree: that is, the crowd.

Elias Canetti, _Crowds and Power_  

MOB PORN

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The _Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d’Italia_ was the lavish mass distribution monthly to which readers of Italian Fascism’s official daily could turn for photographs and articles on current events much like Americans could turn to _Life_ magazine, Russians to _Ogonek_, and the Chinese to _China Reconstructs_. Starting in the mid-1920s, the _Rivista_ underwent a graphic makeover; among the changes introduced was the inclusion of large format foldouts: panoramic photographs, typically two to six times wider than the standard page size. Foldouts were not uncommon in period magazines and, as with 1960s foldouts of _Playboy_ bunnies, they were understood as graphic highlights detachable for purposes of display in the home or in the workplace. What first drew my attention to the _Rivista_’s foldouts, however, was the object of desire draped across the picture plane: teeming, seemingly infinite multitudes rallying around a visible or invisible leader, tightly packed into architectural settings representative of the great historical cities of the Italian peninsula. The political rally as source of vicarious photo- or porno-graphic thrill: such was the graphic principle that would inform the next fifteen years of the _Rivista Illustrata_’s practice. Years during which wave upon wave of innovative artists and graphic designers laid out its pages: among them Bruno Munari, Mario Sironi, Fortunato Depero, Giò Ponti, and Xanti Schawinsky. The graphic environment shifted with each successive wave. But not the foldouts. Mass rally after mass rally unfolded in every number, right up to the collapse of the Fascist regime.

The obvious explanation for this persistence was the foldout’s propaganda value.
The Rivista was more than an Italian Life magazine. It was a semiofficial party organ, a material conduit between the legions of citizens wedged into squares and Italian public opinion, whose aim was to promote the image of Fascist Italy as a perpetually mobilized modern nation under the rule of a perpetually mobile modern leader. Yet the notion of propaganda raises more questions than it answers ("propaganda" being the label assigned to forms of mass persuasion to which one is averse). It tells one next to nothing about the nature of the images placed in circulation or about the contours of the sociopolitical imaginary which they hoped to tap into and to shape. Nor does it address the larger question of where and how photographic panoramas of the masses fit into the broader stream of crowd images that arises in European culture in the wake of the American and French revolutions, a topic first broached by interwar culture critics such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, and by postwar art historians such as Wolfgang Kemp, but still acutely in need of the sort of in-depth analysis provided by the present volume and by its companion exhibition and catalog, Revolutionary Tides. Last but not least, the invocation of a propagandistic function doesn’t help one to understand how and why panoramic representations of political multitudes became intertwined with experimental typography and the art of photomontage and, with slight though significant variations, circulated not only in interwar Italy, Germany, the United States, Brazil, Mexico and the Soviet Union, but also in the postwar period from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the protest movements of the 1960s through the 1990s.

So the topic of this essay (as well as of Revolutionary Tides) is that literal specter of the Enlightenment known as the revolutionary crowd, hovering between reason and hallucination, between the emancipatory dreams of 1789 and the terror of 1792. It addresses the question of how revolutionary crowds were translated into graphic elements in a media landscape transformed by the spread of inexpensive industrial photolithography, the electronic transmission of photographic images to press agencies, the rise of live media such as radio, and the emergence of visual-verbal hybrids such as photojournalism and newsreels. The process of translation is not reducible to a single story line. Viewed from the standpoint of artistic technique, it is the tale of an evolving repertory of illustrational, painterly, photographic, and photojournalistic practices that gradually reshaped the once text- and print-based public sphere. Viewed from an art-historical standpoint, it is the story of a complex of differentiated but overlapping iconographies of the crowd and of their place within the history of panoramic modes of representation. Viewed from an intellectual-historical standpoint, it is the story of how these practices and iconographies were influenced by millennium-long habits of metaphoring, gendering, and abstracting human crowds, central to political philosophy at least as early as Aristotle and as late as Elias Canetti. Viewed from a sociopolitical standpoint, the story is that of the rise of a politics founded upon principles of popular sov-
made it distinct from other Latin words for crowd such as “multitude” (which had a numerical connotation), and “vulgus” (which was a definition based on class). Interestingly, these words were frequently used in conjunction with each other to flesh out crowd descriptions and draw attention to different aspects of the social make-up of the crowd and the characteristics of its behavior. For example: ‘…hac fugientium multitudine ac turba portae castrorum occupantur’ (…the gates of the camp are beset by this throng and turmoil of fugitives.) [1] Caesar, known for his clear and simple style, uses both “multitude” and “turba”, both of which can simply mean ‘crowd,’ to describe the large number of fugitives and their active panic.

‘…in quo admiratio magna vulgi atque turbae’(…on that day the mob and the crowd were greatly impressed.) Here, Cicero uses “vulgus” and “turba” to indicate that there were crowds of both high class and low class people watching a public spectacle, and thus to remark on the diversity of the audience and the improbability of both groups enjoying the same event.

“Turba’s” negative connotations are also exemplified by its common use in conjunction with “rixa,” a Latin word meaning ‘altercation’ or ‘brawl.’ For example: ‘Ecce autem nova turba atque rixa…’ (At once there was fresh trouble and dispute…)

Justinian, a Roman Emperor in the 6th century AD, uses the word “turba” to signify a tumult in his legal definition of the difference between a tumult and a brawl which occurs in this case in a purely numerical capacity in apposition to “duorum” meaning ‘two.’

‘… namque turbam multitudinis hominum esse turbationem et coetum, rixam etiam duorum.’ (… for a tumult is of a crowd of men who gather and make a commotion, but a brawl is between two.) [2]

Justinian’s definition highlights how the type of crowd described by “turba” was not only a large number of people gathered together, but also an entity with its own motive energy as a result of this gathering.

For the Roman elite (whose writings survive to us and are thus our major source of information despite their self-assigned position outside of the crowd), a crowd was never orderly or passive. Instead it was an active and unstable force that needed to be controlled through law or distracted by entertainment. The presence of a crowd was ereignty and of the consequent need for new images and mythologies of the collectivity as well as models of political action and agency based upon the physical massing of bodies in public spaces or the performance of symbolic marches and mobilizations in real space and time.iii A multilayered tale, in short, as difficult to contain within the bounds of a single essay as are the oceanic masses enframed within the foldouts of the Rivista Illustrata, here woven together into four narrative units bearing the subtitles Tides, Types, Tiles, and Spillways. Tides concerns the oceanic metaphor as applied to crowds. Types sketches out the history of what will be referred to as “emblematic” crowd images. Tiles describes the development of “oceanic” human panoramas with respect to the prior emblematic tradition. Spillways deals with the transformation of “oceanic” fragments back into geometrical emblems in the context of modernist photomontage. The essay concludes with some reflections on the contemporary roles assumed by multitudes: their enduring function as sources of experiences of ecstasy and thrill in the domains of leisure and entertainment, on the one hand; their increasing eclipse by virtual counterparts in the political conflicts of postindustrial societies, on the other.  

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3. I have briefly sketched out the overall contours of this argument with a contemporary focus in “Ascensão e queda da multidão,” Veredas—A Revista do Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil 6, no. 61 (January 2001): 26–31.
Have you ever noticed that at the great political demonstrations love is in the air? I don’t mean the erotic charge of seeing so many beautiful people out together in the streets—although that is also a component of the experience. I mean primarily a properly political feeling of love. We recognize together what we can share in common, what power we have together, what we can do with each other. This is the feeling I’ve had, for example, at the two sessions of the World Social Forum I attended in 2002 and 2003. They were not really demonstrations, I suppose, but rather encounters among people who spend their lives at demonstrations. Activists and intellectuals from all over the world came to Porto Alegre, Brazil, to confront the problems and promises of the contemporary forms of globalization. There were discussions, debates, and official pronouncements, of course, but the experience was primarily defined simply by being together with the nearly one hundred thousand people who had come. We could see in each other the possibilities of a new and better world. We could see in each other a new power. This is exactly Spinoza’s definition of love.

One shouldn’t forget also the feeling of love that arises perversely at many demonstrations from conflict and adversity. The first time you smell tear gas or come into physical conflict with the police or find yourself arrested at a demonstration can be a transformative experience. For me come to mind the experiences at the World Bank-IMF protests in Washington in April 2001 and the antiwar protests in New York in February 2003. In both cases the police seemed bent on posing obstacles and creating conflict at every turn. Such experiences do inspire hatred and rage, of course, but they also create an intense solidarity and desire among those demonstrating together. I don’t mean to suggest we should seek out confrontation with police and create conflict at demonstrations. On the contrary, I argue against such tactics every chance I get at political planning meetings before demonstrations. But sometimes that conflict comes whether we want it or not. And there is no denying the power of the experience of being so many together like that and suffering the assault of the police. That too is a kind of love, I suppose, a love born of adversity.

I should point out that when I describe this experience of love arising from seeing our common power in each other I am not suggesting that we are recognizing some common faculty or characteristic or quality that preexists in all of us, some notion...
like “our common humanity.” That would be a notion of recognition something along the lines of classic German idealism, posing this recognition as a revelation of our common authentic selves against alienation. No, I have in mind something closer to Walt Whitman’s love for a stranger. What Whitman recognizes is really the possibility of camaraderie—not some common quality that we have always shared but a common experience and a common power that we can create. One important distinction between the two notions lies in the temporality of the common. The notion of the common that interests me is not pregiven but points toward the future, as a possibility. That means that the preexisting notion of the common (our common humanity, for instance) is fundamentally passive, whereas the other is active and creative: the common we share is something we create. More importantly, the preexisting notion tends to set aside or even ignore the differences among us by highlighting the common in greater relief. When we create the common, in contrast, we remain singularities, our differences remain different and yet we can work together and create a common power.

This is one reason why Toni Negri and I prefer the concept of multitude to the notions of the crowd, the masses, and the mob. On one hand this has to do with the nature of the multiplicity involved. One might say that all these concepts designate social multiplicities, but really the apparent differences in the crowd and the masses easily fade to indifference. Too often the apparent multiplicity turns out to be merely an indifferent unity. The concept of the multitude, in contrast, is meant to name a set of singularities, that is, differences that remain different. On the other hand, this distinction of the multitude has to do with the passivity of the crowd, masses, and mob, which is closely related to their indifference. The mob, of course, along with the crowd and the masses, can do things, sometimes horrible things, but it is nonetheless fundamentally passive in the sense that it needs to be led and cannot act of its own accord, autonomously. That is why manipulation is such an important theme with regard to mobs and crowds. They cannot lead themselves; they must be led. In fact, all the classic discussions of manipulation, panic, and imitation from Le Bon and Tarde to Canetti and Kracauer rest on these twin characteristics of indifference and passivity. The multitude, in contrast, must be an active subject, capable of acting autonomous: a multiplicity of singularities that are able to act in common.

This multitude has been emerging in the political demonstrations of the “network movements” or the “movement of movements” that first appeared perhaps in Seattle in 1999 or in Chiapas in 1994. The distributed network is good image for an initial understanding of the functioning of this multitude because each of the nodes remains separate but potentially connects to all the others through an unlimited variety of relations. And such a network is open in the sense that new nodes can always be added with new relations to the existing network. Maybe we
should think of the love in the air at the great political demonstrations these days as a kind of network love—the love that results when a multiplicity of singularities act in common and feel their power.

I’m reminded of the opening of a poem in prose by Charles Baudelaire: “Not everyone can bathe in the multitudes” (“Crowds,” Paris Spleen). Such an immersion in the multitude is a beautiful image and an adequate one as long as we understand that in the process of immersion the bather does not remain a separate individual but becomes the bath—a becoming-multitude. But really this experience is not such an exclusive privilege as Baudelaire imagines. (That is the open nature of the network.) We all have an open invitation to take a bath in the multitude. ■