Among those who took notice of the powerful presence of the masses on the political and cultural stage of his time, Charles Baudelaire was nearly alone in extolling the experience of the urban crowd. His prose poem “Crowds” describes the phenomenon as a dialectic of “multitude, solitude,” in which these terms prove to be interchangeable, even identical. For Baudelaire, enjoying the crowd is an art that depends upon “the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming.” Like the fully self-possessed dandy, who spends his days strolling the urban street and attending to its spectacular effects and chance encouters, the poet can easily abandon his identity to assume another. Such a man does not automatically surrender his reason and conscious will upon immersion in the crowd, as most crowd theorists assumed, but intentionally selects whose personality to inhabit: “The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or some one else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man’s personality. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.” Baudelaire describes the rare ability to transcend the confines of the ego as the precondition for experiencing “feverish delights,” moments of “a singular intoxication in this universal communion.” Paradoxically, however, such communion is given only to the few, for whom the multitude presents an open site for colonization. Indeed Baudelaire imagines that
Chapter 8: Mass, Pack, and Mob: Art in the Age of the Crowd

Tracing the semantic history of a word as rich and varied in its linguistic genealogy as the term “mob” obliges one to start somewhat in the middle, go backwards, and then again go forward in time. Mob is a shortened version of “mobile,” belonging to the epithet, “mobile vulgus,” which literally translates as “excitable, fickle crowd.” Using “mobile vulgus” as a starting point to uncover mob’s Latin roots, we will chart its ensuing evolution into the modern form of “mob.”

“Mobile vulgus” derives from Latin philological ancestors such as “moveo,” “mobilis,” and “vulgo.” “Moveo” contains a plethora of meanings, including: 1) To impart motion (a cause), to enter into or be in motion (a person or object), to be liable or move or be loose; 2) To shake, agitate, or disturb; 3) To move purposefully, to exercise (the voice, tongue), to control; 4) To shift or change the location of; 5) To disturb or interfere with the functioning of; 6) To stir or rouse someone from rest or inactivity; 7) To cause a change of attitude, opinion; to move to tender feelings, soften, touch; to occasion, excite, provoke. “Mobilius,” an adjective resulting from the combination of moveo and the suffix -bilis, shares many of the same connotations: 1) Quick in movement, nimble, active; 2) Capable of being moved; 3) Varying, changeable, shifting; capable of being modified, mutable; 4) Inconstant, fickle, easily swayed.

“Vulgo,” the main root of “vulgar,” means: 1) To make available to the mass of the population, to make common to all; to make of general application; to prostitute one’s body; 2) To scatter abroad, to spread out; 3) To make widely known, to spread a report, to make public, to expose. “Vulgar,” drawing on the “founders of colonies, shepherds of peoples, missionary priests exiled to the ends of the earth, doubtlessly know something of this mysterious drunkenness.”

The Parisian crowd, newly on display in the era of Haussmannization, provides Baudelaire with an opportunity for an exhilarating encounter with an unknown, but still particularized “other.” The thrill of imaginatively entering the “stranger as he passes” recalls Baudelaire’s peculiarly modern definition of beauty (exemplified by the dandy), which must offer the frisson of the unexpected and strange, the fleeting and the eternal. The threatening homogenization that characterized crowds was palliated in part through a pose of aristocratic distinction, which allowed the dandy to remain master of the gaze, while remaining unseen. Yet elsewhere in the prose poem Baudelaire writes of being submerged in the multitude, of “relish[ing] a de-bauch of vitality at the expense of the human species.” If the poet/dandy is only at home on the boulevards of the modern city, it is because he is also its quintessential product, the counterimage of the bustling crowd. His exaggerated individuality, elegant fashions and cool demeanor constitute a protective mask, a defense against urban shocks and the threat of a leveling anonymity so acutely analyzed by Georg Simmel. As Baudelaire put it in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” the artist/dandy is like a self-conscious mirror reflecting the kaleidoscopic patterns of life, “an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting.”

Cosmopolitan in his tastes, rootless but at home in a world of electrifying spectacles, the artist/dandy seeks to amplify his identity by becoming a reflective surface shimmering with the transient and alluring effects of modern, commodity culture.

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iii For Baudelaire, the artist/dandy finds his natural habitat in the crowd where he can be at once at its center, and yet invisible: “The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. . . . To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere, to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits. . . . The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes.” Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists, 399–400.

iv Baudelaire, “Crowds,” 70.

v For a discussion of the dandy as “a creature who is all masks and impenetrable surfaces because he needs to shock in order to shield himself from the shocks administered by the modern metropolis,” see Schnapp, Staging fascism, 103. For Simmel’s analysis of the effects of urban shock, and of the leveling of difference due to the money economy, see: “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in On Individuality and Social Forms (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971), 330, this passage is also discussed in Schnapp, Staging fascism, 101.

the ideas of mass dissemination and general application, comes to signify the common people or the general public, the multitude of undifferentiated or ordinary people, a flock (of animals) and the members as a whole of a particular class or category.

In English, “vulgus” first assumes the form of vulgar, which in the 15th century was employed as a noun and adjective characterizing the common or ordinary class in society, especially the ignorant and uneducated. In naming the Latin version of the Bible the Vulgate, scholars distinguished St. Jerome’s translation as the one supposedly in common use in 16th century England. By the 18th century, “vulgar” also signified vernacular or common speech. It is only in 1687 that the Latin form “vulgus” replaces vulgar to refer to the common people.

“Moveo” and “mobilis” both find their trace in the English word “move,” used in the 14th and 15th century as meaning to change or shift position, to lodge and displace someone or something. In the 16th century, “move” could also signify the application or administration of a remedy and the promotion or advancement for an office. All of these significations contain the same thread of movement and motion. “Movable,” the adjectival form of “move,” is the primary predecessor of “mobile.” “Movable” signifies a readiness or aptitude for motion but also comes to mean fickle, inconstant, and changeable, recalling the connotations of mobilis.

With the appearance of “mobile” as an English word, we first approach the modern sense of “mob.” “Mobile” originally derives its sense from phrases like “Primum Mobile,” or the “First Moving Thing,” in the 16th and 17th century. “Primum Mobile” refers to the outermost sphere added in the Middle Ages to the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, and was supposed to revolve round the earth from east to west in twenty-four hours, carrying with it the (eight or nine) contained spheres. “Mobile” grows to signify the capacity for movement or for being free and unattached.

In September of 1966, the Italian historian Delio Cantimori pointed out a particular task of historical research, that of investigating “sets of deeds and of conscious and unusual actions or phenomena of long duration” that were nonetheless concrete and possible to document.

The phenomenon that I intend to study here, evoking a series of diverse situations in which it has manifested itself in the past and continues to manifest itself today, is the use of written texts that are publicly exhibited by human masses, or crowds, present and active within urban realities.

In societies that are more or less partially literate, there exist, and have always existed, situations in which organized masses, more or less numerous, of men and women, participate in or attend a public event, bringing with them, individually or in groups, objects (panels, signs, pieces of fabric, banners and so forth) covered with written texts that are legible from a distance and that are used in various ways.

Thus far, scholars’ attention has been concentrated on the immobile, so-called “exhibited writings,” affixed or inscribed in a stable way in some public place, on walls or monuments; thus it has been until now and thus it will continue to be for all those writings of a communicative, political or advertising nature that have populated and populate the spaces of cities, from Pompei to New York. But it seems to me that, so far, a completely different phenomenon has not been examined: the phenomenon of autonomous displayed writings, produced spontaneously and exhibited ostentatiously by human masses in movement, crossing an inhabited place or standing in an open place like a square or a stadium, or even in closed places, such as sufficiently large rooms.

I will state, right away, in order to clarify for my readers the scenarios that I intend to dwell upon, that I am thinking about public events such as processions, parades and demonstrations on the one hand and sports events or ceremonial and political meetings on the other. The protagonists of these events are, to turn to the interpretative categories delineated in his time by Elias Canetti, “still masses,” such as those concentrated in closed squares, in stadiums, in rooms and so forth, and “masses in motion,” slow or rapid. In the first case, the “still masses,” though remaining such, can move the exhibited writings more or less rhythmically, and in the second case, the mobile masses can transform their motion, their march charged...
CROWDS

of meanings, including an assemblage of the numerous in all old countries?” As the 18th century is that such vast classes of mankind are distinguished by the appellation of the vulgar, or the ignorant, “mob,” are so particularly the uncultured or illiterate class. Thus, “mobile vulgus” is first shortened to mob in the context of “mob” in the 17th century, beginning to signify a promiscuous woman or a piece of negligée attire. In Jane Austen’s “Mansfield Park” (1814), Tom Bertram urges Fanny Price to play the role of the Cottager’s Wife in their play by saying, “You must get a brown gown, and a white apron, and a mob cap, and we must make you a few wrinkles, and a little of the crowsfoot at the corner of your eyes, and you will be a very proper, little old woman.” A “mob-cap” is an indoor cap that a woman wears in the 18th and 19th centuries, preserving the connotation that it is an article of clothing worn in private.

These senses of “mob” are demonstrated in its subsequent usage as a verb, meaning to dress untidily, to go in disguise so as to escape recognition or to frequent low company. This connotation of “mob,” the association with loose or disorderly character and conduct, combines with “vulgus” in the late 17th century to forge the meaning of an excitable common people. Early in the 17th century, “mobile” is first used as a term denoting the common people or populace.

Alongside the development of “mobile” in the 17th century, “mob,” stemming from “mab” (meaning a woman of loose character in the 16th century), begins to signify a promiscuous woman or a piece of negligée attire. In Jane Austen’s “Mansfield Park” (1814), Tom Bertram urges Fanny Price to play the role of the Cottager’s Wife in their play by saying, “You must get a brown gown, and a white apron, and a mob cap, and we must make you a few wrinkles, and a little of the crowsfoot at the corner of your eyes, and you will be a very proper, little old woman.” A “mob-cap” is an indoor cap that a woman wears in the 18th and 19th centuries, preserving the connotation that it is an article of clothing worn in private.

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rabble or a tumultuous crowd, an aggregation of persons regarded as not individually important, or a heterogeneous collection. Austen probably has the latter connotation in mind in “Mansfield Park,” where Edmund Bertram declares, “A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton in dress.”

Since Swift’s criticism, Samuel Johnson sealed the modern meaning of mob in his “A Dictionary of the English Language” (1755), defining it as, “The crowd; a tumultuous rout.” Concurrent with Johnson’s definition, “mob” circulates as a verb in 18th century English. It now comes to denote attacks carried out by disorderly crowds; crowding around and molesting or annoying; pressing unduly upon; thronging; and congregating in a “mob” or disorderly crowd. Edmund Burke employs mob in this sense in his “Reflections on the Revolution in France” (1790), writing, “The Assembly, their organ, acts before them the farce of deliberation with as little decency as liberty. They act like the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience; they act amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men . . .” Paine, in another portion of “The Rights of Man” deploys “mob” with the same connotation: “There is in all European countries, a large class of people of that description which in England is called the ‘mob.’ Of this class were those who committed the burnings and devastations in London in 1780, and of this class were those who carried the heads upon spikes in Paris.”

In the 19th century, mob becomes slang for a company or gang of thieves or pickpockets working in collusion. This connotation eventually finds its way to the 20th century meaning of mob, signifying a more of less permanent association of violent criminals, also known as the mafia.

Another, very contemporary phenomenon must, from this point of view, be considered apart from the previous discussion: that is the writings exhibited by crowds made up of organized sports fans, generally located within places designated for such events (stadiums, gyms, fields). This phenomenon must be considered separately because of the formal contiguity of these writings with the spontaneous written productions of a political nature and because the protagonists are almost all young.

In these highly ritualized situations, the writings, exhibited on rigid cards or on large or even enormous banners of cloth, constitute real and authentic works of art by anonymous artists, or, better, by groups, the language of which is strongly expressive and aggressive, tinged with jargony self-representation, sex and violence. Since the protagonist public is constrained in the place where the sports event takes place, that event at which the public is spectator and participant, the writings are the entities that move, that, accompanied by slogans, sung or screamed in chorus, are lifted up, are lowered, are rolled up and unrolled, configuring a show within the show in the form of a actual warrior dance which is often followed by, in the moment of the final paroxysm, a serious physical clash that concludes the presentation.

In conclusion, I would like to affirm that it is exactly this most recent kind of situation, in its explicit mixture of sport and of violence, through the rhythmic movement of millions of bodies and hundreds of writings, that constitutes a new and original use of the exhibition of the writings of urban crowds.

Translated from the Italian by Heather Webb