

SPECIALE Crowd, Space and the Movie Theater Lure. Notes on Contemporary Off/Online Moviegoing⁽¹⁾.

“The Era of Crowds”: *Premonitions and Legacies*

Cinema and the concept of crowd seem to be connected by a mutual ancestry: producing a symbolic exit/enter movement, the image showing a group of people on their way to *La sortie des usines* shares its birth with one of the most renowned and premonitory opinions on the idea of crowd itself, which proclaimed that “the age we are about to enter will be in truth the era of crowds”⁽²⁾. It was 1895, a year marked by the first film by the Lumière brothers and by the publication of Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Despite his prophetic tone, the theorist probably never imagined that his statement would be validated more than a century later in contemporary crowdsourcing and crowdfunding practices. Therefore, his reflection not only represents one of the first theorizations of crowds’ behavior, but also initiated a rich, interdisciplinary inquiry. The research path started by Le Bon crossed at least philosophical issues, economical aspects – if the crowd is meant as labor force – and media and film studies elements when the idea of the crowd refers to a group of spectators.

In response to this rich history, we seek to sketch continuities and discontinuities between a modern and a contemporary idea of the crowd. We do so in order to identify a historical background that informs contemporary crowdsourcing practices and to draw a connection between cinematic experience, publicness, participation, and off/online space. In this view, it is possible to trace a three-step conceptual itinerary that links: i) the early formulations that attempt to make sense of the changes in man’s psychology as he shifted from an individual to a collective paradigm; ii) the modern *fin de siècle* framework featuring the crowd as an explicitly urban presence that poses the personal and the public element in a dialectic, though interconnected relationship; iii) a further formalization in which the plural quality of the crowd implies a wide range of effects in terms of spectatorship and collective action.

In his early attempts to theorize the crowd, Le Bon emphasized the collective, socio- environmental element, but ignored the socio-cultural context in which the crowd acts. His research, which partially owes its insight to sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s intuitions⁽³⁾, assumed a pessimistic tone and aimed to identify three stages that describe the evolution and the organization of the collective formation – submergence, contagion, and suggestion – under the conviction that the thought processes and behavior patterns of individuals vary as they become part of a larger group. More specifically, individuals often adapt to the expectations of the surrounding culture and modify personal traits in order to identify with the mainstream ones⁽⁴⁾. A depletion of individual responsibility, a strong development of anonymity, and an inclination to assume the predominant ideas and feelings are the main results of this process. Subsequent theories focused on both the conscious and subconscious ways in which individuals align with the crowd, a tendency that was seen as conformist.

According to Walter Benjamin, the main stage of these antinomic dynamics is the city, where technological changes – including the cinema, the telegraph, and the passenger train – produced a faster, fragmented experience. Benjamin reconstructs an atmosphere characterized by discontinuity and random encounters with a reality that is perceived as disaggregated and lacking in social exchanges. The symbol of such dispersion is the solitary figure of the *flâneur*, who is notably exposed to the sensory overload of the city and to those continuous shocks provoked by modern life, that elsewhere were described in terms of intensification of nervous stimulation⁽⁵⁾. To some extent, this kind of experience recalls the Benjaminian concept of the loss of aura. In this perspective, cinema is seen as the medium able to recompose an existence, which is unstable, uncertain, and unpredictable. Precisely this operative aspect, according to which cinema does not symbolize just a lens able to represent the life of the crowd, but rather an agency explicating an experiential regime which is made acceptable and understandable despite its featured discontinuities, introduces a shift in Benjamin’s language, as he starts naming the modern masses as

SPECIALE a “public”. The two terms can be connected to the couple *Körper/Leib* that characterizes the author’s theory of innervation⁽⁶⁾. The process of innervation bridges the individual body (*Körper*) and the collective one (*Leib*), that is to say it articulates a broader plural formation out of the singular, fragmented, and dispersed ones. Such a mechanism does not reset the centrifugal force animating the former disjunctive formations, since it acts simultaneously, reuniting them centripetally within a plural one. As a result of innervation we have an entity, which is both subject and object, individual and collective – an entity that mirrors Benjamin’s effort to reestablish the regime of modern experience. The concept of innervation is essential in the frame of our argument for it introduces the complex notion of the mimetic faculty. It is a quality used to describe the relationship between the collective and its components. According to Miriam Hansen, the mimetic is “a relational practice – a process, comportment, or activity of ‘producing similarities’ [...] a noncoercive engagement with the other⁽⁷⁾” that consequently seems to imply a common way of reacting to fragmentation.

To Benjamin, the mimetic faculty is at risk before the modern generalized dispersal. However, as cultural history has demonstrated, the profound transformations affecting experience and perception, the evolution of the concept of crowd and its variations, and the renewed possibilities of social association open up the chance of a transition of the mimetic faculty itself. This faculty is not necessarily condemned to an unrecoverable decay, but instead can be subject to renovation. This reinvention rests on the acknowledgement that modernity does not stand uniquely for a disorienting experience and disenchantment, but for a radically new modality of perceiving and living reality.

These new experiential practices run up against the low self-perception associated with being part of the crowd. This lack betrays a certain persistence of the pessimistic theory of the crowd articulated by Le Bon. Thus, Benjamin assumes an ambiguous position, since – as Miriam Hansen argued – his observations on the masses range from a concept of fragmented and basically alienated individuals dispersed in the city to a more positive idea of masses “as revolutionary productive force⁽⁸⁾”. This does not imply an identification between productive force and the working class, because the crowd taken into account by Benjamin encompasses a wider, heterogeneous group of people, whose experience is progressively more filtered by technology and therefore characterized by the fact of being the initiators of a new mode of perception. Masses could be seen as a revolutionary productive force in their possibility to act as a body, triggering the mimetic faculty. Nevertheless, such a view is not thoroughly pursued by Benjamin, whose image of the masses, as Hansen pointed out, “ultimately remains a philosophical, if not aesthetic, abstraction⁽⁹⁾”. This is perhaps a backwash derived from the elitist vision of the crowd that had informed his work. Recognizing one’s own belonging to the modern mass does not necessarily represent a negative condition. On the contrary, it would affirm one’s adherence to a new, more complex and technologized form of grasping reality, testifying a certain, more or less active, openness to the changes affecting the way to see the world. The issue of crowd can thus be analyzed as a metaphor of the modern creation of a collective horizon of experience, intended as a strategy to recompose an atomized, fragmented human life – a frame in which, needless to say, cinema plays a collector role. A more pragmatic approach towards the issue of crowd is offered by Siegfried Kracauer’s ambivalent conception of the collective formation, which he exclusively described in terms of “mass”. Whereas his distaste for capitalist aspects of modernity led him to identify externality, surface and display as keywords to describe the city masses, they are not criticized in their practices, rather observed from inside as a new plural subject devoted to new leisure activities. In this perspective, movie theaters became visible sites of a new public and thus of a renovated publicness. Despite expressing regret for the mechanized life, the author also opposes a sort of ideal collective configuration to the self-fragmented, anonymous group of atomized subjects described by Benjamin: plurality is read here as chance for solidarity, equality, and possibly democracy. Cinema is an emblem in which masses find themselves represented as a fragmented group, and at the same time, it provides the occasion to gather this same undefined, dispersed mix of individuals in

SPECIALE the frame of a unitary spectacle. Miriam Hansen suggests that this spectatorship dimension identified by Kracauer is crucial in sketching not simply a new way to experience publicness, but in showing the conceptual connection between cinema and the experience of space:

Epitomizing the multiplication and interpretation of spaces already advanced by other media of urban commercial culture [...] the cinema systematically intersects two different types of space, the local space of the theater and the deterritorialized space of the film projected on the screen. It thus represents an instance of what Michel Foucault has dubbed 'heterotopias'⁽¹⁰⁾.

This is particularly important within a reflection about contemporaneity: in this scenario the publicness typical of cinema, cannot by any means refer to a twofold heterotopic *ensemble* of spaces (theater and screen), but it is called to take into account virtual and online territories as well. This triggers a multiplication of spatial dimensions, giving birth to an articulated overlapping of environmental layers. These environments are places⁽¹¹⁾ of cinematic experience in all respects, and thus they represent a further dimension of deterritorialization, where the shift between theater and screen, and the transition from the physical context of film-watching to the digital one, and possibly back again to the physical one can be negotiated. This very room is to be seen as a space of mutual, collective, convergent activity performed by a gathered plural formation. Tracing a connection between Benjamin and Kracauer, this space is indeed a platform for the masses to play, in which their behavioral similarity recalls the mimetic faculty. Modernity therefore seems to offer a reconsidered conception of crowd to contemporaneity: elitist-pessimistic theories of the crowd are included in the modern debate about masses in a conservative way, but at the same time their discussion weakened and reprocessed them. The result is a more complex elaboration of the idea of crowd that tries to map the phenomenology of masses in a broader, sometimes contradictory way. Thus, we are not attempting to conquer a position *far from the madding crowd*. Instead, we identify the productive potentiality of an informal group, exploiting the fruitful possibilities of a flexible, ephemeral collective formation, where the sense of belonging is functionalized and prioritized preserving both the individual and the plural dimension. In this regard, the promotion of crowdsourced movie screenings tap into populist narratives about the productive potential of crowds and about the pleasures of being part of a moviegoing public.

Ideologies of Crowdsourcing

These modernist ideas of the crowd have been reinvigorated in the more contemporary practices and techniques of crowdsourcing. Although crowdsourcing has most commonly been associated with various forms of productive – and often unpaid – labor, the term has also been used to describe a wide range of theater-on-demand models that allow consumers to vote on which movies they would like to see at their local movie theaters. Under this definition, the practice of programming a movie theater is crowdsourced. Supporting this concept of crowdsourcing is a democratic ideal that assumes that crowds, due to their ability to collaborate, are often wiser than experts acting without the aid of others.

The term crowdsourcing was coined by Jeff Howe as a *portmanteau* that combined the terms crowd and outsourcing to describe the ways in which companies tapped into the cheap, often voluntary, labor of online groups in order to complete a task⁽¹²⁾. Thus, rather than outsourcing this work to cheap labor markets, Howe argued that companies could find ways to use the talents and energy of the online crowd to solve problems or to contribute to creative projects. As Howe pointed out,

Hobbyists, part-timers, and dabblers suddenly have a market for their efforts, as smart companies in industries as disparate as pharmaceuticals and television discover ways to tap the latent talent

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of the crowd. The labor isn't always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It's not outsourcing; it's crowdsourcing⁽¹³⁾.

Thus, crowdsourcing functions as a means of extracting labor from groups who may provide their talents or skills with the hope of gaining some form of compensation, including nonmonetary rewards. Howe cites a range of examples, including Threadless T-Shirts (<http://www.threadless.com/>), iStockphoto (<http://www.istockphoto.com/>), and Eli Lilly's InnoCentive program (<http://www.innocentive.com/>), promoting crowdsourcing as a cheap alternative to other forms of labor, one that imagines the crowd as a force interested in working for the common good. Daren Brabham challenges the idea that the laborers who contribute to a crowdsourced project are amateurs in the strictest sense of the term:

The amateur label portrays the crowd as a nonprofessional, never-professional horde, a group that cannot and should not organize for its own good. Distributed labor, whether outsourced overseas or crowdsourced over the Internet, is a hallmark of global capitalism and a proven strategy for deflating the power of unions and hindering labor organizing⁽¹⁴⁾.

While Brabham admires the productive abilities of "crowds," he is also attentive to the ways in which the term can be used to de-professionalize and disorganize laborers, often placing them in competition with each other for small financial rewards. Brabham's observation also offers a rough outline of the (often unstated) popular definition of crowds in the era of crowdsourcing, "a nonprofessional horde." Crowds by this definition are seen as informal, unofficial, and ephemeral, precisely the group of people typically associated with moviegoing and other leisure-time activities.

Crowdsourcing Cinema

Crowdsourcing has become a common tool used to promote and produce movies, especially by independent filmmakers. These filmmakers would often rely on the then-emerging social networks to build interest in their films and especially to make that interest more visible or legible to theaters that might be willing to screen their films. These tools were adopted because of a movie industry that seemed increasingly broken and unfriendly to independent filmmakers⁽¹⁵⁾. What followed was a flurry of experimentation, along with a number of tools such as Kickstarter (<http://www.kickstarter.com/?ref=nav>), IndieGoGo (<http://www.indiegogo.com/>), OpenIndie (<http://openindie.com/>), Wreck A Movie (LINK INTERNO AL PEZZO CIANCIA, GOLDONI, MATTANA), and more recently, Gathr (<http://gathr.us/>) and Tugg (<http://www.tugg.com/>), that could be used to automate crowdsourcing, in part by directing the actions of disaggregated groups of people. Perhaps most famously, Kickstarter has allowed millions of creators to propose projects and to request funds from others who might be interested in seeing that project reach completion. These forms of crowdfunding have received significant attention recently, in no small part because they have been adopted by more commercial filmmakers, including Zach Braff, Spike Lee, and Rob Thomas (the showrunner for the TV series *Veronica Mars* LINK INTERNO AL PEZZO CHECCAGLINI), to raise funds for new film projects. In each case, these filmmakers have offered a pitch that is posted online and then circulated through social media tools. The pitches place tremendous emphasis on two aspects: the pleasure of moviegoing and the power of the crowd to make those theatrical experiences possible. But these crowdsourcing tools have also been widely used to schedule and promote movie screenings of movies that have not received traditional distribution, a process that allows audiences to "demand" that a film come to a theater near them. By taking this approach, independent filmmakers have sought to make the case that the tastes of online audiences have typically gone ignored and that crowdsourcing tools can help to ensure a more democratic entertainment industry,

SPECIALE one that might appeal to the true wisdom of the crowds. These practices of crowdsourcing build upon the participatory cultures described by Henry Jenkins, as well as the infrastructures of connectivity that Jenkins has associated with the idea of media convergence. Because texts can circulate easily among multiple devices, media consumers have become more acutely aware of their ability to act on texts, to join in the cultural conversations about popular culture⁽¹⁶⁾. More recently, Jenkins has embraced Pierre Lévy's concept of collective intelligence as a means of valorizing the work of the (often physically dispersed) crowd. As Jenkins argues, these fan communities can work together to solve narrative problems—making sense of puzzle narratives, for example—or to engage in forms of fan-related activism, including efforts to promote favorite TV shows and movies⁽¹⁷⁾. In this updated understanding of collective intelligence, the crowd is able to recognize itself as at once creative and ephemeral, as being capable of producing new texts and new events, even if those events—crowdsourced film screenings, for example—are temporary. Of course, the availability of these tools is no guarantee that they will be used in this fashion. Convergent media technologies are used just as often to affirm dominant modes of film distribution as they have been to foster these kinds of crowd activities.

“The Love Child of Netflix and Kickstarter”

These desires for being a part of the moviegoing crowd and for democratizing distribution have informed the theater-on-demand platform Gathr, a platform currently available on in the US that allows filmmakers and moviegoers to propose screenings at local theaters. Individuals or groups can request a screening by picking from a menu of films, setting a time, and naming a location. Once a minimum number of people reserve tickets, the screening is scheduled, and the requestors' credit cards are charged. Usually, most of the films “tip” when 20 people pledge to attend, a relatively small threshold, but just enough for theater owners and filmmakers both to benefit.

The Gathr platform was created by Scott Glosserman, the director of the horror film, *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), and the documentary, *Truth in Numbers: Everything, According to Wikipedia* (2010), who pitched the service in a *Huffington Post* article as a cross between video-on-demand and crowdfunding, or as he breezily put it, “the would-be love child result of a super-sweet night on the town between Kickstarter and Netflix”⁽¹⁸⁾. Glosserman framed his discussion of Gathr in terms of its ability to democratize distribution, providing indie filmmakers with a means for getting their movies on the big screen, as well as the ability for audiences to demand films they actually want to see.

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DIY, democratization, theatre accessibility for the indie productions: what is the engine of this crowd-based activity, and what is the logic behind it? What kind of mechanisms does the platform trigger in order to move disaggregated groups of people and productively harmonize their action?

The most recent contributions about crowdsourcing provide a series of keywords, suggesting an atmosphere where sharing, participating and democratize movie distribution become the measure of what is seen as an effective side of cinematic experience. The ability to contribute to the promotion of a screening of a movie that would otherwise be excluded from the distribution circuit involves a dimension of engagement, which is essential to any (cinematic) experience. Therefore, apart from apparently proving a movement “back to the motherland”⁽¹⁹⁾, Gathr underscores the chance to be active in a new field of crowdsourcing: although many commentators associate crowd practices with a creative bottom-up attitude, this service is not a platform for user-generated content *strictu sensu*, for the crowd does not create new material. The attention should be focused here on a different stage of the production chain – namely on distribution. This phase, generally managed by operators only, becomes the territory for a

SPECIALE user-generated practice that broadens the sphere of interaction between the public and the movie. In this sense, services such as Gathr impose a new pattern of movie consumption, encompassing offline and online informal, nonprofessional, voluntary intervention in the organizational aspect of the cinema-machine. In this way, a new field of action for the crowd is basically available – a room of publicness that enlivens a dynamics similar to that characterizing modern cinema spectatorship: as it happened at the first motion picture shows, this space of crowdsourcing, which is both an ephemeral virtual environment and a physical, theatrical one, heterotopically engages strangers in relatively anonymous yet collective acts. The result is a stimulation of the sense of perceiving “themselves as a public gathering, an ‘active force’ [...] witnessing and participating in the performance”⁽²⁰⁾, that was typical of early audience. Thus, crowdsourcing enhances contemporary theatergoing, by means of which the decision of attending a movie screening does not simply betray a nostalgic rediscovery of the enchantment produced by the big screen – or, as Benjamin would put it, a way to “discover the new anew”⁽²¹⁾ – but an occasion to provide a first person contribution to the development of the cinematic experience.

Adopting a Benjaminian language we argue that the kind of theatergoing favored by Gathr triggers a process of innervation and revives the mimetic faculty of the users. More specifically, the mimetic faculty can be seen as an inventive strategy adopted by the “contemporary masses” to deal directly with distribution, reconfiguring it according to a crowdsourcing logic. In fact, the individuals using the online service actually resemble a crowd rather than a community, as online media mechanisms generally imply: despite the chance to get in touch one another, the users do not become members of a real group sharing stories and personal data, nor do they strike up relationships. They remain a disaggregated group of people, whose mimicry does not produce any particular coordination: the similarity in their behavior is simply motivated by a functional and opportunistic attitude – plus the desire to have a certain film screened in their local movie theater.

Chuck Tryon, Miriam De Rosa

Note

1. The article is the result of a joint reflection by the authors; paragraphs 1 and 5 were written by Miriam De Rosa, while paragraphs 2, 3, 4 were written by Chuck Tryon.
2. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, London, Ernest Benn, 1952, p. 14.
3. Gabriel Tarde analyzed the psychological aspect of criminal behavior that he interpreted in terms of imitation; this process, extensively presented in *The Laws of Imitation* (or. 1890, H. Holt & Co., New York, 1903), preludes to the following epidemiological reading of crowd phenomena that sees them as contagion. In the wake of Tarde, Tony D. Sampson recently offered an interpretation of contemporary forms of relationality coupling the contagion suggestion and digital connectivity. For an inquiry of the virality mechanisms produced by digital epidemic, please refer to T. D. Sampson, *How Networks become Viral: Three Questions concerning Universal Contagion*, in Jussi Parikka, T. D. Sampson (eds.), *The Spam Book. On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, 2009, and Id., *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Network*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2012.
4. Such attitude notably found its stronger though extreme expression during the Thirties, when the age of European totalitarianisms posed the conditions to develop a kind of cinema that was purposely directed to influence masses. The pioneer use of the filmic device by the Nazi regime represents in this sense just the most obvious example. We cannot consider in depth this issue, on which an extremely rich literature is available. Perhaps the most vivid account of this process is Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

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5. Georg Simmel, *Metropolis and Mental Life*, in Id., *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971.
 6. The concept of innervation permeates Benjamin's writings: for an account of the issue, refer to Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street", *Critical Inquiry*, 25, winter 1999, pp. 306-343.
 7. Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience. Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2011, p. 147.
 8. *Ivi*, p. 62.
 9. *Ivi*, p. 63.
 10. *Ivi*, p. 55.
 11. We use here the term *place* as a specifically connoted space, according to the Heideggerian notion presented in Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, in Id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, pp. 145-61.
 12. William Safire, "Fat Tail," in *The New York Times*, February 5, 2009 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/magazine/08wwln-safire-t.html?_r=0 Last Access: 16 September 2013.
 13. Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," in *Wired*, June 14, 2006 <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html> Last Access: 16 September 2013.
 14. Daren Brabham, *Crowd Sourcing*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2013, pp. 88-89.
 15. The most famous articulation of this problem came from Mark Gill, CEO of the Film Department. See Id., "Yes, the Sky Really is Falling," in *indieWire*, June 22, 2008. http://www.indiewire.com/article/first_person_film_departments_mark_gill_yes_the_sky_really_is_falling Last Access: 16 September 2013.
 16. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press, 2006.
 17. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, New York, New York University Press, 2006, pp. 136-140. See also Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, New York and London, Plenum Press, 1997.
 18. Scott Glosserman, "Gathr is the Love Child of Netflix and Kickstarter," in *The Huffington Post*, July 30, 2102. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tribeca/future-of-film-gathr-is-t_b_1696250.html Last Access: 16 September 2013.
 19. Francesco Casetti, "Back to the Motherland: the Film Theater in the Postmedia Age", *Screen*, n. 1, 52, 2011, pp. 1-12.
 20. M. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 95.
 21. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 390.