

BIGGER THAN A CULT, SMALLER THAN A MASS

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Three hundred and fifty dead in a human avalanche in the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

An expert in the dynamics of masses replies to the question of whether all the appropriate measures were taken with regard to the annual concentration of three million people. The only thing that still registers for M after listening to this bit of news on the radio is that same person: an expert in the dynamics of masses. It implies a predictability in the movements of the multitude that is really frightening.

"A retaining wall had been built with the aim of dividing and directing the force of the current in two more controllable flow corridors," continues the expert in his nasal tone of voice. "The fact that many of the pilgrims carry their baggage on their backs, an unforeseen factor, generated the first blockage. In fact there cannot have been a stampede in the sense that the acceleration of elements has precipitated the overspilling of the flow – rather, there has been a collapse, of constant force..." The nasal voice is, perhaps, the fault of the phone connection. It doesn't go with the careful diction with which he states things; almost with the enthusiasm of someone seeking the words to describe, in real time, an astronomical phenomenon.

At no moment does the fact come into the interpretation of the phenomenon that the three million people were hurling stones against a number of columns symbolising Satan in fulfilment of a religious command. Flow dynamics.

M turns the radio off and sits down again at the computer. Flickering on the screen is a blank, almost blank, document with a provisional title: "Bigger than a cult, smaller than a mass." It's been there for two days. It was there a day and a half before three hundred pilgrims died, crushed by the strength of their own conviction, pushing with constant force. It's a quote he's robbed from a Bob Christgau text about punk, "Avant-Punk", from 1977. He's separated the fragment from the complete phrase, which reports, with suitable eloquence, on the form of the collective in youth subculture. It's something he's been talking about for a while, and he's ashamed of not having found the phrase himself before now. That's why he's separated it from its context, trusting in its enigmatic quality as a title.

Now he imagines the phrase read by the expert in mass flows and it terrifies him.

M doesn't remember having felt anguish, that claustrophobia with which mass situations are credited. And he well remembers being in the middle of cases of stampede that would be the wet dream of the expert on the radio. The way in which a mass disperses (and there's no situation to which the word *disperse* is more applicable) when a police charge begins. Anticipation creates a taut fabric uniting the tiny space that separates the individuals and prepares them, at the first shot, to follow an autonomous but harmonious impulse that describes very complex flows within the overall volume, which disappears in seconds, without knocking people down. Will the experts in mass flows do experiments on a real scale? He likes the idea. He remembers reading a very exhaustive article in which a training session of the riot police was described. The inevitable camaraderie in the staging of the game. Thirty against twenty. All with balaclavas. The attention the reporter paid to the detail that the Molotov cocktails were wrapped in plastic bags in order to increase their potency seemed to be a warning to anyone interested. In any event, a detail that recreated the realism of the exercise. In Mecca, too, they were throwing stones.

There's a Norris Johnson who must have been a bit like that expert in crowd dynamics. He's the author of one of the most influential practical investigations of human stampede phenomena and his study of the Riverfront Coliseum case is still cited as a refutation of the hitherto canonical idea of Gustave Le Bon's, which, without being re-examined since the nineteenth century, underpinned the myth of the impressionability of the masses "subject to a hypnotic force".

(In his 1895 essay, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Le Bon strove to alert people to the dangers of what would be the great phenomenon of the twentieth century, and in passing to cast suspicion on democracy as a system influenceable by the arbitrariness of the multitude. Being the monarchist he was, the displeasure caused by the events that ended in the Paris Commune of 1871 probably drove him to make the diagnosis of that new multitude as the terrible other side of the concept of a people. If in Hobbesian tradition the people are the multitude that has availed itself of the law, which accepts to obey so that all obey, the mass that was anticipated in the Commune could only be criminal. Yes, unavoidably criminal: "Some acts of the masses," he said, "are assuredly criminal if one considers them in themselves, just as is the act of a tiger that devours a Hindu after allowing its young to first maul him for their own amusement.")

As a case study that would refute these clichés, Johnson chose to investigate the stampede that in December 1979, at the Riverfront Coliseum in Cincinnati, Ohio, killed eleven fans of The Who, who entered the concert area running. Fans, rock-and-roll and "hypnotic forces" is a combination that seems to go rather well with that preconception of the idiot mass; nevertheless, the study ascertains that the behaviour patterns are

not ascribable to the whole mass as a unit, but to small independent groups within it, which in this case, moreover, caused the collapse by trying to help each other.

Also there at the time was another expert in mass dynamics. He decreed that the best way of avoiding greater damage through an eventual suspending of the function was to hide the deaths from the members of The Who, who didn't know what had happened until after the end of the concert. M finds this bit of information amusing. Sonny Barger, head of the San Francisco chapter of the Hells Angels, must have thought the same at Altamont, as well. He came the closest to being the head of security of a concert that had hired the Angels for a free event in which the Rolling Stones wanted to convoke a crowd of sufficient size to claim its place as a generational event along the lines of Woodstock or Monterrey. When Keith Richards, more or less aware that the aggressive chaos into which the assembled crowd had developed had already cost the life of a person at the hands of some uncontrollable Angels, threatened to stop playing if they didn't calm down, Barger, as he himself laughingly repeats to whoever might want to listen, stuck a gun in his ribs: "He played like a motherfucker!" The generic term used in English for both the security at events and the repression of riots is crowd control.

Bigger than a cult, smaller than a mass – M has finally got down to writing – would perhaps be the moment of formation of a crowd that Elias Canetti dubbed a pack. The band, the hunting party, the squad. A small crowd that is ruled by an inevitable internal impulse to grow in size, but which when it expands disappears as such, turns into a mass, crystallises. The mass is susceptible to unitary representations, at once valid for the totality of the crowd and for each of its members. But it is this same representability that leads to a dispelling of all the formless potential in which, in a magic moment that is always too late and always too soon, the entire force of the formless union unfolds. The *potentia* of production inevitably generating its opposite, the *potestas* of reproduction – that is the unrepresentable revolutionary moment, the one that only acquires an image in retrospect, when in a further moment it is formalised; when it has already succumbed to its own logic of appearing as form and thus disappearing as force. When Christgau writes his article for the *Village Voice* in October 1977, he cannot be aware that his reading of the phenomenon from within, linked to that of so many others who were writing in similar terms at the same time, is creating the representation that in the actual article he points out as being lacking.

Christgau's intention in his 1977 article, "Avant-Punk: A Cult Explodes... and a Movement Is Born", was to dismiss the then-plausible possibility that the phenomenon that bound together a set of heterogeneous expressions under the generic name of punk might strengthen, from among all its representations, those most prone to the fascination for fascism. "The English punks," he writes, "with their defiant lumpen

nihilism, might well recall 'the growing masses outside all class strata' described by Hannah Arendt as 'natural prey to Fascist movements'." This recourse to cult and mass as two opposed but complementary poles, an extreme consequence of the mechanisms of fascination, seems more pertinent within the framework of the American popular culture from which Christgau speaks. The notion of totalitarianism, a primordial antagonism of liberal freedom in the American imaginary, has its definitive representation in the concentration of masses. The exhibitions of fascist or communist masses, form, in this fantasy, the obscure other side of the nation. The cult, for its part, as a small community shut off in the fascination of coexistence and regulated to the highest degree, would be the sinister opposite of the familiar. A family called Manson to his Church, the one that inhabits that fantasy in a more mythic way. Nation and family. As a synthesis of these two extremes, in an image of total nightmare, the massive concentration of Moonies of the Church of Unification, in simultaneous mass weddings between faithful followers from all over the world, forming a supra-family/supra-nation, at once mass and cult.