Stefan Jonsson

On Anna Ådahl’s Crowds

Few things are as bewitching as the sight of large crowds in motion. Consider the flock of swallows, tens of thousands of birds in perfect coordination, forming a dancing cloud. Consider the opening of the Olympic Games, a military parade in China or the crowd making its way across Sergel’s torg in Stockholm during rush hour. Look at the colony of ants, the start of the long distance cross-country ski race Vasaloppet, a herd of cattle or the procession of demonstrators that stretches for miles in front of and behind you. Anna Ådahl often takes such perspectives. She enters the metro and seeks a viewpoint with an overview. Then she resolutely places herself or her stand-in in the flow and creates a dam.

What happens when countless people form a “mass”? What happens to an individual who joins the crowd? What happens to the individual who blocks the flow or tries to redirect the advancing bodies? What does it mean to regard your fellow human beings as masses?

In these seemingly simple questions, the major issues of society and politics converge with aesthetic problems.

Social issues: Which are society’s laws pertaining to movement? What is a society?

Political issues: What type of power arises when people synchronise their actions? To what end can this power be used?

Aesthetic issues: How can social and political processes such as these be formed, framed, explored and mediated. Perhaps they can even be activated?
For the past couple of centuries, philosophers, social scientists, artists and politicians have grappled with such problems. They touch upon the secret of the modern era and the mystery of democracy: the idea of collective being. According to Ådahl, the answer to the question of the secret of the “masses” is in the eye of the beholder, sometimes also in the ear, nose, fingertips and muscles. She connects politics with our perceptual apparatuses and body movements.

Why is the sight of large crowds in motion bewitching? One explanation is that the sight provides an illusion of power. In the past, observing others from a tribune or a pulpit was an act reserved for those who wielded power. It was only those with great resources who could construct towers and squares, balconies and boulevards, arenas and exercise venues that allowed them to observe and master the subjects, who in turn admired and bowed to them. The older sediments in our city centres still provide a hint of how the urban space was planned so that the prince and the priest could control the people.

Photographic technique changed the game. On the one hand, technical media increased the possibility of monitoring and control. The camera’s lens deepened and sharpened the ruler’s gaze. On the other hand, the camera made it possible for those who had previously been observed to become observers. And in addition to observing the authorities they could also observe themselves. In both still lives and moving pictures those whose eyes had been fixed on the gutter were now able to enjoy the sight of large crowds in motion and contemplate the power that lay in their own way of life – not the power to command, for this belongs only to individual leaders, but the power to make, to produce and protest with others.
In brief, optical technology ushered in a new epoch in the history of the “masses”. It is no coincidence that the camera and mass movements are contemporary creations.

It is in the encounter between the media and politics that Anna Ådahl activates her art. At the core of her exhibited works, the viewer can discern – at times clearly, at times encrypted – a struggle that has taken place throughout modernity: the struggle to depict, reproduce, simulate and control large masses. Halfway through the exhibition you become aware that you are part of the installation. You are being monitored, controlled and programmed. Your answer? Your resistance?

That the sight of large crowds in motion is bewitching is not only because it provides power. It is also because it allows us to anticipate an ability to act, a collective agency or even a collective intelligence.

The early mass psychologists and mass sociologists, from the 1880s to the 1930s, understood this. The strolling, working, voting, demonstrating, striking and rebellious “masses” that filled the big cities, the mines, the factories and the plantations of the past and who also formed the basis of the fears and fantasies of a new social order possessed a quality that was generated by their actual quantity. The people were many. Their number constituted a power in its own right.

Those who developed theories about the mass spoke of the soul of the mass or the mass consciousness. They noted that people in a crowd seemed to be capable of acting – indifferent to suffering, self-sacrifice or death – in a way that none of them were capable of outside the collective body. Theoreticians warned of such action. They spoke of the mass as an irrational and dangerous organism. They claimed that it was of the utmost urgency to investigate the actions of the mass. It was essential to
identify the spatial, mental and emotional bonds that held the mass together. Such an analysis would at best detect the psycho-social laws that guided mass action. In this way, it would be possible to predict the movements and actions of the crowd. More than that: it would also be possible to remotely control the power of the “masses”.

Contemporary computer technology’s ability to rapidly process large amounts of information is another stage in the story. The technique can be used to track individual bodies and faces in a crowd. It can create new bodies and faces, multiply them into masses and simulate how people act in flocks.

Several of Anna Ådahl's works cite contemporary visualisation systems developed by companies and researchers in order to control and simulate human collectives. The purpose of their work is to develop new consumer products and control techniques: special effects for the gaming, film and media industries, simulation software, surveillance systems and police and military tracking and reconnaissance methods, or tools for community planners wishing to design “safe” cities and efficient traffic systems.

Those that today have the privilege of observing large crowds in motion are no longer princes of flesh and blood, but rather a digital or artificial intelligence. Neither is the collective whose movements are observed by this intelligence of flesh and blood; they consist of humanoids whose skeletons and muscles are created by coordinate systems. In this way, the technology attempts to simulate and, as a consequence, also direct the movement of large collectives. The choreographed bodies migrating in and out of Ådahl’s monumental Triptych may be the end point of the dream of control. The programme no longer imitates humans. Humans imitate the programme.
Anna Ådahl examines collectivity from two different starting points. In her work we encounter the collective as a malleable or fluid matter, as a mass. At the same time, we realise that this mass is created by perceptual devices that impose their own algorithmic and geometric order on the collective.

This alternation between two modes of examining the crowd reveals two incompatible ideas about the political. One idea is totalitarian: collective life must be controlled. The other is democratic: in collective life there is a quality that stems from the power of humans to collectively realise their humanity.

This is probably why the sight of large crowds in motion is so bewitching. In them we imagine what democracy could be, were it not bound and restrained by outside powers or observers who control it with their apparatuses. Against the artificial intelligence of the observer Ådahl places art’s intelligence, thus demonstrating that “masses” are always defined by the people who participate in them.

PRESENTATION

Stefan Jonsson is Professor of Ethnic Studies at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society, REMESO, at Linköping University and a writer and cultural critic at the daily Dagens Nyheter. He has written about modernity and modernism, racism and the colonial world order and European ideas and fantasies about people, masses and democracy from the French Revolution until today: A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions (2008) and Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism (2013) both published by Columbia University Press. He is currently completing a book on the aesthetic dimensions of collective protests.