

*Dirk van den Berg*

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## Imagining yourself one of a multitude: ideology critique of urban crowd depictions

### Summary

Revisiting the array of image formats for the scenic picturing of urban environments and concomitant spectator roles, the topic of this investigation is how certain crowd formations serve as manifestations of ideological power in modern cities. Examples of crowd depictions are drawn from both visual art and popular culture. Michel de Certeau sees panoptic surveillance in the modern city as calling forth a "scenic other" located below its threshold of visibility. Prompted by this notion, the aim of this study is to investigate the historical conjunctions between stereotypical views of urban masses and urban spaces in ideological perspectives, as well as certain typiconic features of a number of alternative visual traditions in Western depictions of the populace in urban settings.

### Verbeel jou dat jy een van 'n menigte is: ideologiekritiek op uitbeeldings van stedelike skares

Die onderwerp van hierdie herbeskouing van beeldformate en verwante betragtersrolle in scéniése uitbeeldings van stedelike omgewings is bepaalde skareformasies waardeur ideologiese mag in moderne stede gemanifesteer word. Voorbeelde van skarevoorstellings in die visuele kunste sowel as die populêre kultuur word betrek. Panoptiese bewaking in die moderne stad roep volgens Michel de Certeau 'n "scéniése andere" op, geleë onder die drempel van sigbaarheid. Met dié siening as vertrekpunt, word kultuurhistoriese verbande ondersoek tussen stereotipe sienings van stedelike massas en stedelike ruimtes in bepaalde ideologiese beskouings en, aan die ander kant, die tipikoniese eienskappe van 'n aantal alternatiewe visuele tradisies wat 'n rol gespeel het in Westerse voorstellings van stedelike bevolkings.

*Prof DJ van den Berg, Dept of History of Art and Visual Culture Studies, University of the Free State, P O Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300; E-mail: vdbergd@hum.uovs.ac.za*

**M**ultitudes assembled in response to supreme authority or command and mass demonstrations of collective power form a universal theme in human history. It evokes images of the mythical tower of Babel, armies mustering on battlefields, hordes of plundering soldiers, revolutionary mass action, massive traffic congestion, packed sport stadia or global satellite telecasts of the latest media event.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon acquired a new impetus on the rise of the modern city with its industrial machinery, technological systems and administrative apparatuses — a veritable *cosmopolis* of modern rationality, in Stephen Toulmin's (1990) memorable description. With urban populations as the supreme form of demographic concentration and cultural power escalation, whether for good or for evil, how should we interpret the multifarious images of urban crowds? In previous investigations of "scenic" depictions of urban environments,<sup>2</sup> my focus was the display rhetoric of such urban pictures, conceived in terms of imaginative interaction with the isolated spectator. The present aim is to build on this approach by probing the ideology-critical ramifications of the question: What happens when spectators imagine themselves part of the depicted multitude in images of urban crowds?

Relating depictions of the bodily posture and the gesture of staring into the distance to Warburgian pathos formulae, previous investigations introduced aposcopic vision as a recurrent feature in the scenic tradition's array of typical image formats (cf Van den Berg 1999: 70-4). Understood metaphorically — as a visual trope on rhetorical *ethos* and *pathos* in scenic display — *apokopein* encapsulates imaginary prospecting and sightseeing roles projected by scenic

- 1 This is an expanded version of a paper first presented in Durban at the seventeenth annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians (July 2001). I would like to thank the session participants for a stimulating discussion of the proposed ideas and images, as well as the anonymous referees for their critical comments and helpful suggestions on improving the quality of the text.
- 2 "Scenic" images or pictures with "scenic" imaginative traits are part of one typiconic tradition in art history, with a common worldview frame also featuring in a prominent tradition of parallelist thought in science and philosophy which includes figures like Leibniz and Einstein (cf the detailed discussion in Van den Berg 1997).

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pictures. Such roles emerge from a scenic interplay of totalising and localising orientations, as a rule involving stationary surveillance and mobile habitat tact, or distancing and approximating procedures. In effect, aposcopic vision's "zoom-out" and "zoom-in" operations shape the identity of *imago* roles imagined for participants in scenic worlds — in other words, invoking the "who-am-I?", "where-am-I?" and "what-am-I-doing?" of spatialising and orientating self-images enacted in the spectator's imaginary role-play.

An example will explain the visual rhetoric of scenic persuasion. Gustave Caillebotte's *Man at the window* (Figure 1) is a familiar window-scene painting which engages spectator role-play with its visual negotiation of boundaries between interior and exterior spaces and its gendered role allocation in the contested divisions of private and public spheres. The stark contrast between the imperious male figure in the window frame and the object of his gaze — an isolated



Figure 1: Gustave Caillebotte, *The man at the window* (1876). Oil on canvas, 117.3 by 82.8 cm. Private collection.

and diminutive female figure crossing the street at a distance — evidently connotes asymmetrical power relations. Assuming the faceless roles at the extremes of the pictured line of sight, we sense domination in the male gaze's descending slant. With legs astride and hands in the pockets, the male posture conveys the self-assured authority of one accustomed to the practice of urban surveillance. He may be positioned in the privacy of a domestic interior but he is in complete control of public space. The contrasting vulnerability of the single female, braving exposure to this gaze in a public place in metropolitan Paris, entails discretion, circumspection and wariness on her part in the practice of an urban stroller's habitat tact.

Yet role-play in this exemplary case of distanced approximation involves only single individuals located at positions of relative isolation. This characteristic of the imaginary world presented in the Caillebotte painting sets the scene<sup>3</sup> for the spectator, predisposing his or her responses to the painting. We are of course free to decline the painting's visual overture. Deliberately mustering a contrary "effort of meaning" in order to extricate ourselves from complicity with its gender stereotyping, we may also choose to read it in a critical manner, against the grain of its typiconic frame, as it were. Nonetheless, the likely response to its scenic power is visualised in a photograph by Thomas Struth, *Art Institute Chicago 2* (Figure 2), a striking image chosen for the cover of a popular textbook (Edwards 1999). In the centre we see yet another, equally renowned painting by Caillebotte, *Place de l'Europe: rainy day* (1877), shown dominating the exhibition space. The close correspondence of the positioning of the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneurs* in the painted scene with the photographed visitors in Chicago's Art Institute offers remarkable evidence of a museum space appropriating scenic qualities. The painting's imaginary scene seems to open on and merge with a real, present-day, urban scene in which the random patterning of individuals is reiterated.

Departing from this scenic arrangement of individual role-players but not from the affective power of images, the topic to be investigated in this study is the phenomenon of massing multitudes in

3 In other words, the scene is set by representing a social field and roles, the tenor of spectator engagement and the thematic focus of this imaginary world's scenic frame. Cf Van den Berg 1996: 8-9 for a discussion of these categories.

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Figure 2: Thomas Struth, *Art Institute Chicago 2* (Chicago 1990). Museum photographs series, Verlag Mosel 1995 (Edwards 1999: cover illustration).

representations of urban crowds. In examining pictures of the modern city's typical crowd formations, the object is to determine the imaginative temper of *imago* roles in a number of images that engage the spectator in imaginary role-play as a member of the crowd, as one of the multitude. Comparisons with contrasting renderings from alternative visual traditions will serve to further highlight certain distinguishing features in scenic renderings of urban crowds.

As a first step, the current status of the typiconic frame of recurrent traits in the scenic picturing of urban crowds should be delineated. Rather than surveying historical examples from the scenic tradition, I shall cite Michael de Certeau's book, *The practice of everyday life* (1984). This well-known text expounds but also challenges the worldview parameters framing the actions of the imagination in this tradition.

## 1. The crowd as an urban pattern and “the chorus of idle footsteps”

The chapter “Walking in the city” from the “Social practices” section of De Certeau (1984: 91-110) offers a fine example of discourse articulated in a scenic perspective. The chapter begins with a description of a panoramic view of Manhattan, looking down from the 110th floor of the former World Trade Center, the twin towers destroyed in the attack of 11th September 2001. Acrophobics would be well advised rather to visit the continually updated panoramic scale model of New York City permanently on exhibition in the Queens Museum. But De Certeau reminds us that, centuries before the advent of the technologies of balloon and airplane flight, tower-building and skyscraper construction, space exploration and satellite surveillance, scenic artists were already creating vertiginous panoramic prospects from the imaginary heights of the bird’s-eye-view perspective.

The real issue concerns the exacerbated social conditions of late modern urban existence — the excessive scale of demographic concentration, skyscraper construction, urban sprawl, mass housing and commuting systems. Beyond any real or imagined height of speculation, the city utterly absorbs and overflows the totality of the spectator’s encircling field of vision. It escapes our grasp. In the light of this experience, De Certeau (1984: 92) concludes his description of Manhattan by posing the incisive question:

To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? [...] I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole’, of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.

In formulating his answer, De Certeau’s argument shifts its focus between two points of view corresponding with the dual imaginary roles of spectator engagement in scenic pictures. Beginning with the prospector’s dominant surveying perspective, the argument subsequently moves towards the wandering sightseer’s counter-perspective.

De Certeau first delineates the traits of the archetypal prospector. He lays bare the surveying orientation’s far-reaching ideological distortion and its ultimate idolisation in the scopic regime of panoptic surveillance and dominion. Playing a prospector role, the spectator is

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in effect lifted out of the city's grasp. As an imaginary model of subjectivity, this role situates the spectator at a distance from the panorama-city, leaving the urban masses behind. Physical elevation transfigures the spectator into an alien voyeur — none other than the scenic sublime personified. Hence De Certeau (1984: 92) comes to the conclusion: "The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more".

The breathtaking view from the former World Trade Center's 110th floor is but a further instance of a familiar mode of subjectivity in the scenic imagination — the boundless *hubris* of human power based on extreme ideological distortion and the absolutising of knowledge and control. Enthralled by the utopian fiction of a totalising eye with "all-seeing power", prospecting spectators look down like gods from a great height, reading the city as if it were a spatialised text or map. They imagine themselves as the planners, surveyors or inspectors of the absorbing texture of a regulated urbanistic system of systems. De Certeau dubs this the "concept-city" — in other words, a totality simulacrum designed for real human habitation or, in another sense which still needs to be explored, Hobbes's *Leviathan* reincarnate (cf Bredekamp 1999).

From this exalted viewpoint De Certeau next casts his eyes downward towards the swarming mass of city dwellers at ground level. The focus of the argument now shifts towards the position of the sightseer, the complementary scenic role whose fateful mutation into a scenic "other" is traced by De Certeau. Throngs of urban pedestrians have been a favourite topic of scenic painting since the flowering of the Venetian *vedute*, and especially since the heyday of sightseeing *flâneurs* in paintings of Parisian boulevard scenes with the traffic seen from appartement rooftops, as can be seen in the oeuvres of Impressionists like Caillebotte, Renoir and Pissarro (cf Varnedoe 1990). In this regard, however, a new situation arose in the city during the twentieth century. This change may be noticed in the sharp contrast between late-nineteenth-century observers of the visual spectacle of capital and De Certeau's (1984: 93) determination that the twentieth-century city-dweller's anonymous experience takes place below the panoptic urban simulacrum's threshold of visibility.

Margaret Bourke-White's renowned *Time-Life* photograph of 1951, *Beach accident at Coney Island* (Figure 3) illustrates something of the vertiginous change in perspective. From the towering prospector point of view the crowd takes the form of a cluster of dots in the familiar circle formation of onlookers at accident scenes. For sightseers down below, however, the beach crowd consists of holidaymakers who have fled the city and who are drawn to gawk blindly at the anonymous spectacle of some unspecified human misfortune. It is at this ground level that De Certeau encounters the concept-city's "other" — pedestrians' nomadic experience of a "migrational city". At this level of analysis, he encapsulates the localising features of the mobile sightseer role. However, instead of continual feedback between meshing scenic



Figure 3: Margaret Bourke-White, *Beach accident at Coney Island* (1951).  
Time-Life photograph (Conrad 1984: 255).



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roles — the typical parallelism of prospector and sightseer — the Bourke-White photograph, like De Certeau's analysis, suggests that the dual spectator roles have mutated into bipolar opposites. Under pressure from extreme and alienating realities in the metropolises of advanced capitalism, a disturbing and pervasive dialectic has apparently been injected into the scenic tradition's parallelist worldview frame (cf Van den Berg 1997).

De Certeau's analysis uncovers negative repercussions in the wake of protracted or entrenched ideological distortion. The repressive construction of planned, legible cities ultimately challenges the usually balanced parallelism of scenic spectator roles. The totalising prospector position's awesome panoptic authority in effect blinds the sightseeing position. Consequently De Certeau amends certain established ideas about the urban *flâneur* as a walking sightseer, an indi-

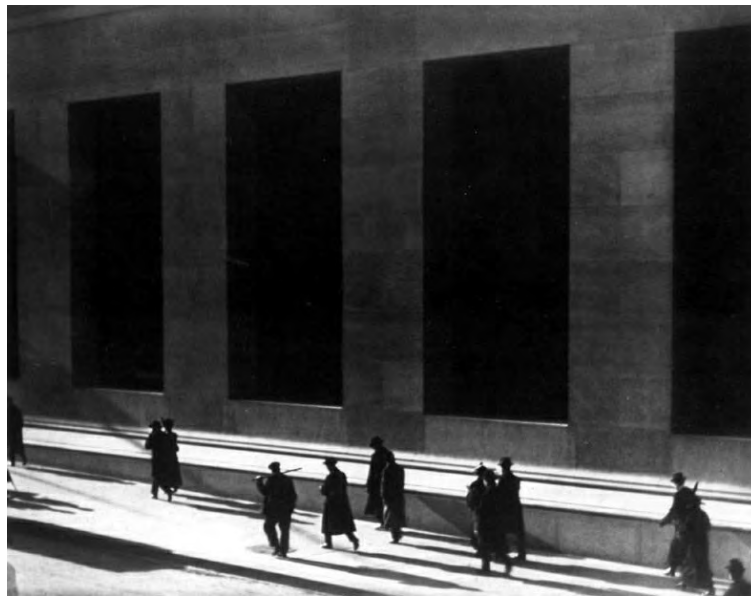


Figure 4: Paul Strand (1890-1976), *Wall Street, New York* (1915). Platinum print, 25.3 by 32 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art (Weaver 1989: 183).

vidual among the multitude, visually immersed in or distracted by the urban spectacle. Thus he describes the microbe-like pedestrian movement in the urban traffic as “an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city” (De Certeau 1984: 93). This mutation should not be seen as a feature of urban life that made its appearance only in the expanding metropolises of post-war prosperity. As early as 1915, the bleak play of shadows in Paul Strand’s haunting photograph, *Wall Street New York* (Figure 4) captures the oppressive reality of this confining urban space as well as the dejected nomadic existence of its inhabitants.

De Certeau furthermore rejects urban records as valid representations of the nomadic city. As an image format, the urban record has long been cherished in the scenic tradition for depictions of city life at fixed localities, recording throngs of people in the congested flow of daily traffic or crowds during parade spectacles (cf Ryan 1989). Take for instance the flow of traffic movements recorded by Bryan Burkey in delayed exposure photographs, *Times Square, New York* (Figures 5 & 6). In De Certeau’s opinion such records, route surveys and archives capture mere traces of ground-level mobility. Records refer only to “the absence of what has passed by” and “miss the act itself of passing by” (De Certeau 1984: 97). They match numerous pictures with fleeting glimpses of passing human figures caught on reflective window and shopfront surfaces — the subject of many photorealist paintings. Though visible themselves, trace recordings in effect render invisible the operations of walking the city, wandering, window-shopping or commuting. Such tracings rather constitute procedures for forgetting the multitude of actions that made them possible. “The chorus of idle footsteps” is De Certeau’s (1984: 97) memorable metaphor for a scenic “other” and for its actions that are blind to the panoptic city.

Under this heading we find the substance of his text, namely the exposition of a fascinating theory of pedestrian speech acts — the manifold enunciatory practices of walking the city, as it were “between the lines of the urban text”.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the tenor of a no-

4 The project of negotiating this transient and indeterminate space calls to mind a related socially-engaged spatial concept — the notion of “littoral aesthetics” propagated in the forum of the e-journal *Variant* <<http://www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/forum1.html>>

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Figure 5: Brian Burkey, *Times Square, New York, by day* (1990). Dye transfer print, 40.6 by 50.4 cm. Artist's collection (Varnedoe & Gopnik 1991: 20).



Figure 6: Brian Burkey, *Times Square, New York, by night* (1990). Dye transfer print, 40.6 by 50.4 cm. Artist's collection (Varnedoe & Gopnik 1991: 20).

madic rhetoric of pedestrian footsteps, gaits and trajectories is basically transgressive. Administered and suppressed by urbanistic systems whose decay they have outlived, improvising pedestrians and commuters insinuate themselves into the urban simulacrum's networks of surveillance, appropriating the city's spaces and arrogating its interstices to themselves in order to resist and subvert its panoptic authority.

Despite his extensive critique of the scenic tradition's ideological investments, De Certeau does not therefore abandon its overall parameters. He prefers a stance of critical adaptation and resistance — a familiar stance in the scenic tradition among the critics of the modern technocratic city. This critical position is associated, for instance, with the rising popularity of the urban rebus image format among numerous modernist artists in whose work a dystopic city is thematised. Invented in the eighteenth century and refined by Giovanni Battista Piranesi in his *Carceri d'invenzione* prints (c 1745-61), this image format involves picture puzzles representing the urban condition as a form of incarceration, with city dwellers lost, trapped or fragmented in the ruins of vast and haunted mazes. Being blind to the urban totality, imprisoned wanderers cannot escape disorientation, despite the acuteness of their local habitat tact. The fact that De Certeau opts for strategies of resistance in countering a labyrinthine urban condition reveals his deep-seated and sustained allegiance to the scenic tradition. An opponent of the decaying technocratic city, his confidence in the subversive resilience of the buoyant multitude's "chorus of idle footsteps" remains undiminished.

De Certeau's devotion to the invisible mobility of the "migrational city" evinces a profound interest — a speciality of the scenic tradition — in accumulated patterns of random movement created by a multitude of singular pedestrian actions. This interest recalls the visual screening of fragmented and clustered visual elements in Richard Hamilton's upbeat depiction of the milling crowd of tourists in *Trafalgar Square*.<sup>5</sup> In comparison with De Certeau's critique of the panoptic city's staggering complexity, Hamilton's rendering of the

5 Richard Hamilton, *Trafalgar Square* (1965-67). Oil on canvas, 80 by 120 cm. Köln: Museum Ludwig (Gohr 1985: 167). Cf Van den Berg 1999: 36.

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patterns of urban movement appears simply too optimistic. Some of Andreas Gursky's recent photographs are more effective in suggesting the intensity of the scenic sublime, for example the glittering but oppressive urbanistic system framing infinitesimal deviations of minute random patternings in one of his photographs from 1997, *Chicago, Board of Trade* (Figure 7), an image composed from reiterated digital image fragments.



Figure 7: Andreas Gursky, *Chicago Board of Trade* (1997). C-print, 73 by 95 cm.  
New York: Matthew Marks Gallery (*Art in America* 1998, 86(7): 86).

De Certeau's tacit yet deep-seated commitment to an underlying apriori unity — a pre-ordained harmonious order of parallel diversity — allows him to take for granted the complementarity of a multiplicity of singular, contingent and random actions and disparate events, involving an unregimented multitude of agents within the urban totality. Hence his “chorus of idle footsteps” would presumably sound like a poly-rhythmic, aleatoric jazz improvisation, with each independent performer striking out on his own, rather than like a swel-

ling symphonic chorus.<sup>6</sup> Due to the scenic tradition's basically non-revolutionary and utopian optimism, there is no sense of communal revolt against the city; the activism of mass movements and the disturbance of urban order by eruptions of mass insurgence do not figure at all in De Certeau's discourse.

The conclusion appears warranted that, due to its ideological investment in the power of surveillance, the scenic tradition itself is blind to the historical reality of mass insurgence and urban violence. To counter this ideological blindspot — the absence of rupture and mass disruption in scenic representations of urban environments — I now shift the direction of inquiry away from the distanced urban order of scenic perspectives by flooding the scenic blindspot with pictures of extraordinary urban masses from alternative “non-scenic” traditions.

## 2. The crowd in revolt

Two contrasting installations by Anthony Gormley, both with the simple title *Field* (Figures 8 & 9) exemplify this shift. A photograph of the first version, a 1989 Sydney installation, displays the scenic tradition's fascination with multiple patterning effects. Here, the exhibition space itself appears charged with ordering forces made visible by the patterned arrangement of figures, like particles aligning themselves in a magnetic field. In the photograph of the second version, a 1991 New York installation, the gallery space is no longer filled with complex spatial patterns. Instead a looming and invisible power exerts a disruptive rather than ordering influence on the field. The tiny terracotta figures are passive and powerless, with the appearance of suffering victims, patients or prisoners. Manifesting the oppressive reality of an extraordinary human assembly, the overflowing collection of 35,000 figures en masse creates an impression of the urban crowd as a momentous massing of passive resistance.

The massed humanity of the latter image introduces the theme of the crowd in revolt. The image directs us towards a founding text of collective psychology and of the sociology of collective behaviour in

6 This is the gist of Michael Titlestad's (2001) proposal in adapting De Certeau's pedestrian enunciation as an explanatory model for jazz improvisation.

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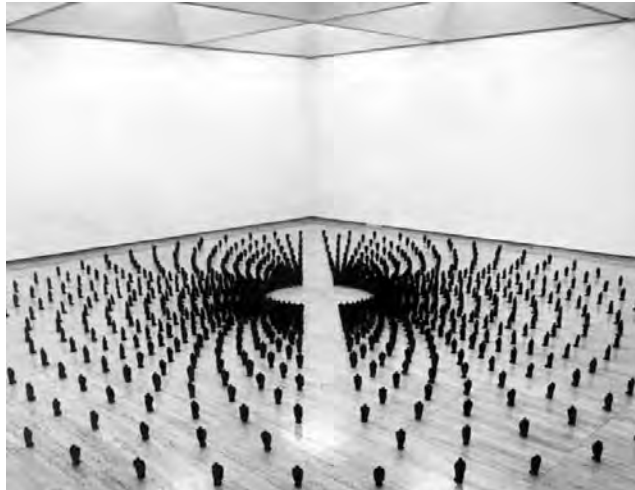


Figure 8: Anthony Gormley, *Field* (1989). Baked clay figures, 23 by 1140 by 1050 cm. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales (De Oliveira *et al* 1994: 44).



Figure 9: Anthony Gormley, *Field* (1991). 35,000 terracotta figures, 8 to 26 cm high. New York: Salvatore Ala Gallery (De Oliveira *et al* 1994: 44).

industrialising societies — Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* of 1895, first translated in 1896 as *The crowd; a study of the popular mind*.<sup>7</sup> It was written in the wake of the upheavals of the Third Republic, the Communard uprising in Paris and the subsequent Haussmannisation of the city (cf Saalman 1971). This classic text's anxiety concerning the irrationality of revolutionary crowds expressed itself in the fabrication of a number of pathological stereotypes related to social unrest, disturbance and disorder — topics recalling the chilling realities of rolling mass action, plundering violence and “necklacing” in twentieth-century South Africa's liberation struggle.

In contrast with Gormley's mournful and relentlessly passive crowd, Le Bon's stereotypes pertain to an excessive emotionality transforming crowds into plundering hordes or savage mobs. Le Bon's “law of the mental unity of crowds” determines that once an individual is subsumed in a crowd, there is a regressive loss of individuality, a state of expectant attention, extreme suggestibility towards and hypnotic contagion by rumour, delusion, hysteria and panic, which will end in rule by a primitive “herd instinct”. On account of its mobility, restlessness and fickleness, the crowd's behaviour is described as unpredictable, irresponsible and amoral, readily advancing from assembling and milling to rioting, brute violence and destruction.

In *Suspensions of perception*, a study of visual attention, Jonathan Crary (1999: 245) alerts us to a peculiar ambiguity in Le Bon's positivist methodology. It concerns a profound and well-nigh Platonic suspicion of the imagination and a preoccupation with phantasmal imagery. Characteristic of the crowd, according to Le Bon, is the incapacitation of rational observation, the destruction of the faculty of seeing, which is at the root of the crowd's “blind rage”. On the other hand, “crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images that terrify or attract them and become motives of action” (Le Bon 1917: 76). Remarkably, this opinion generally

7 Cf Le Bon 1917 as well as Nye 1975 on the historical setting of Le Bon's theories and the ambiguous heritage of collective mentalities and behaviour; cf Evans 1975 and Wright 1978 on the more analytical sociological application of Le Bon's stereotypes.



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informs the strategies and conduct of both opposing camps — seditious agitators and activist producers of political agit-prop posters as well as the status quo strategists of crowd control policing.

Despite Freud's initial support for Le Bon's theory, it has since been discredited by several generations of historians of revolutionary mass action (cf Nye 1975). Nonetheless, Crary is of the opinion that Le Bon did indeed intuit the gist of modern spectacular culture in the sense subsequently articulated by the situationist, Guy Debord (1994). Crary (1999: 246) believes that:

[Le Bon's] 'law of the mental unity of crowds' certainly anticipates the collectivities that will be conjured up by all the telecommunicative and televisual apparatuses of the twentieth century.

To get to the heart of the matter, however, we need to advance one critical step further.

A crowd mentality is not something that is produced on demand or automatically merely by localised assembling or massing; nor is it simply instilled by the mere existence of industrial hardware or fabricated at will by those who own or control the mass communication media. As non-ephemeral phenomena, crowd mentalities rather stem from ideological powers that enthrall us collectively — a consequence of historical domination by communal spirits that produce imagined communities. Powers which demand ultimate human commitment often manifest themselves in prevailing metaphorical images and master narratives — commanding images of worlds and gods, histories and destinies, conflicting social orders and human identities. Ideological images are ingrained as habits of the imagination and memory. Beyond human volition and control, they have the distorting effect of heightening as well as obscuring our common perceptions of the crowded city and its endless representations.

In the following sections, depictions of urban crowds in four contrasting typiconic traditions will be reviewed. The purpose is not to cover all options, but merely to alert us to the affective presence of certain ideological images. These images rival the authority of Certeau's panoptic city, unencumbered by the scenic worldview's blind-spot towards the reality of mass revolt against the panoptic city's totalising image and its totalitarian consequences. The horrific

events of 11 September 2001 may be taken as compelling testimony to the reality of this revolt.

In *Representations of revolution*, Ronald Paulson (1983) examines certain difficulties facing the artists who first ventured to visualise the French Revolution as an unparalleled series of events with as yet unknown historical consequences. Since revolution was inconceivable in the *ancien régime* world order, it could not be represented in traditional visual terms. This assumption is debatable. The legacies of worldviews from the past evidently hold a number of enduring keys to the interpretation of epoch-making transformations. Notwithstanding the singularity of historical events and individual human actions, representations of patterns of social and historical change are eminently comparable. More to the point is the fact that recurrent attitudes to such patterns are viable options even today. Indeed, they guide our understanding of past as well as current transformations, in particular the ways in which we interpret visual representations of bygone or contemporary transformations.

The following comparative analyses of scenic and non-scenic depictions of the urban are in fact based on a collection of cryptic clues from Calvin Seerveld's still unpublished critique of Paulson.<sup>8</sup> The following brief outlines of crowd categories are intended primarily to serve as contrasts to the scenic tradition as well as to critique of current political positions among South African spectators.

### 3. The crowd in harmony

In view of the French Revolution's contested status — inauguratory in Paulson's case, prototypical among progressive historians of mass action who reject Le Bon's stereotyping in the name of revolutionary democracy — it seems fitting to select a first example of crowd imagery from this context (Figure 10). Charles Thévenin's *La Fête de la Fédération* (1792) depicts the ceremonial pledge of loyalty to the new constitution on the Parisian Champ de Mars — a harbinger of sub-

8 Seerveld entitled his seminar handout "Tentative taxonomy of 'revolutions,' counter-revolution and anarchy (for delineating the historical French revolutions and in critique of Ronald Paulson's reductionistic fix on Representations of revolution)" (13 February 1990).



Figure 10: Charles Thévenin, *La fête de la fédération* (1792). Oil on canvas, 127 by 183 cm. Paris: Musée Carnavalet (*Revue de l'art* 1989, 23: 55).

sequent triumphal festivals dedicated to the deity of Reason during the first years of the revolution. Rising above the calm sea of faces, the royal tribune with the figure of the oath-taking king appears on the extreme right, while the altar of the fatherland is visible to the left. This idealised spectacle of an orderly civic massing of the populace in revolutionary democracy clearly counters Le Bon's stereotype of the rabble. It is a rare instance of a crowd image from the idyllic tradition — a visual tradition generally associated with images of idealised and frequently mythological figures set in natural places of delight (cf Cafritz *et al* 1989). In Thévenin's rendition the harmonious crowd in a *locus amoenus* version of the Champ de Mars is turned into a secularised version of the Blessed-in-Paradise iconography.

On the vertical plane a visual correlation is established between two domains — natural and societal. Shaded areas in the human crowd correspond with the clouded sky above, probably intended to

suggest either gathering or dissipating clouds of revolutionary violence. Endowing the crowd with cosmic significance, this correlation furthermore intimates the presence of a transcendent masterplan or authority directing revolutionary events from above. Light breaks through to reveal the dawning of a new age with the institution of a social contract that reconciles class divisions and territorial enmities in a new-sprung sense of national unity.

The union is enacted by a central group of embracing figures in the foreground. It recalls the key group from Jacques-Louis David's *Le serment du Jeu de Paume* (1791), the painting commissioned for the National Assembly as a memorial to the French Revolution's having begun with the oath of unity of purpose between the three estates. In Thévenin's idyllic version this union also implies the solemn pledge of an idealist covenant of harmony with nature. As a utopian ideal this communal awareness of human rights, founded on a universal order of natural justice, motivates Le Bon's opponents. Viewing Thévenin's crowd, South African spectators are reminded of the Union Buildings scene of President Mandela's inauguration, the halcyon days of the "rainbow nation", the African idealism of proclaiming an advanced human rights bill and a number of utopian interreligious rallies.

#### 4. The crowd at war

Countless revolutions followed the French example in rapid succession as revolutionary action invariably generates counter-revolutions. The next case for consideration is associated with the position of revolutionary radicals, like Lenin and Trotsky, committed to a continuing struggle in a "permanent revolution". South Africa is by no means the only country where the battle-cry *a luta continua* is heard in a time of fundamentalism, crusades and holy wars. The heroic tradition's numerous renditions of revolutionary crowds in battle have been influential in this connection, notably in the ideological formation and dissemination of the imagery of the city divided against itself. Struggling and suffering crowds in urban combat zones — at the time of writing, the dominant image on television screens — is a speciality of this tradition whose historical roots may be traced back as far as Heracleitos.

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Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty leading the people* (1830) is a seminal work in this regard (Figure 11). Cast in a social sublime mode of terror, this "epiphany on the barricade" (Traeger 1990 & 1992) presents a triumphal panoply of military images. These include the drama at the barricade, the *élan* of the frontal assault, the heroicised combatants, the emblematic protagonists, the superhuman leader, the waving flag, the clenched fist, the ardent followers, and the bloodlessly dead martyrs. The essential tenor of the painting's frontal display of hostility, antagonistic action and concerted defiance is confrontational and polemical, converting the spectator's space into a combat zone by challenging coming generations of spectators to declare themselves either allies or enemies, either comrades or adversaries in a continuing struggle.



Figure 11: Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty leading the people* (1830). Oil on canvas, 259 by 330 cm. Paris: Louvre.

There are numerous variations on the basic heroic image format, belligerent tenor and agitational import of Delacroix's painting. Thus Théophile Steinlen's *Die Befreister* (Figure 12) draws its spectators into a maelstrom of urban insurgency around the inspiring female figure at the centre. Female instigators of mass violence often appear as hysterical embodiments of clashing forces of nature in Käthe Kollwitz prints (Figure 13). Suffering combatants alongside a



Figure 12: Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, *Die Befreister* (1904). Oil on canvas, 114 by 116 cm. Genève: Petit Palais (Hofmann 1986: 330).

hero with a red flag descend into chaos amid the swirling motion and violent colour of Ludwig Meidner's *Revolution (Barrikadenkampf)* (Figure 14). Burning buildings fall apart in the background — at that time the apocalyptic vision of burning cities was recurrent in his paintings.

Readily reducible to a formal device, this image format was exploited in propaganda by diverse political factions. Multiplied and monumentalised in Soviet public sculpture, heroic features became

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Figure 13: Käthe Kolwitz, "Losbruch", *Bauernkrieg* series, folio 5 (1903/8).  
Aquatint etching. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett  
(Hofmann 1986: 336).



Figure 14: Ludwig Meidner, *Revolution (Barrikadenkampf)* (1913). Oil on canvas,  
80 by 116 cm. Berlin: Nationalgalerie (Roters 1982: 69).

repetitive clichés in agit-prop posters and banners. *Images of defiance*, the Posterbook Collective’s compilation of South African posters from the struggle era, contains numerous examples of UDF, ANC and COSATU posters which echo this formula. Thus a 1985 Cape Youth Congress banner brandishes the revolutionary emblems of the heroic worker, the intellectual and the freedom fighter (Figure 15). A UDF poster *Remember June 16 1976* has an enlarged image of Hector Petersen mounted above a defiant mass rally crowd (Figure 16). This has the effect of dehumanising his tragic death, converting his image into a martyr’s icon, his person into a role model, the crowd below into an army of soldiers, and all spectators into participants in the struggle. These features are still active among the many South African spectators who prefer the epithet “comrade” as a political identity.



Figure 15: Cape Youth Congress banner (1985). Acrylic on cloth. Cape Town (Younge 1988: 11).



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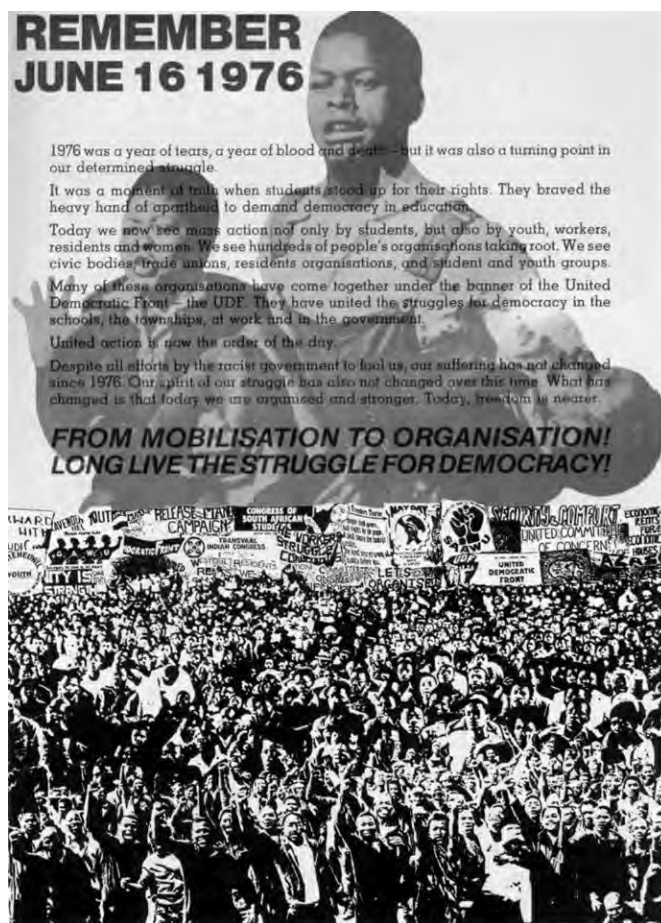


Figure 16: UDF poster, *Remember June 16 1976* (1985). Offset litho print. Johannesburg: STP for UDF (Posterbook Collective 1991: 109).



Figure 17: Umberto Boccioni, *The city rises* (1910). Oil on canvas, 199.2 by 301 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art (Hulten 1987: 119).

Moving beyond the domain of local politics, Umberto Boccioni's painting of 1910, *The city rises* (Figure 17) may be singled out as one of the more persuasive visual encapsulations of the urban crowd in the heroic tradition.<sup>9</sup> It contains an explosive vision of the Futurist dynamics of heroic existence, envisaged as a titanic struggle with oppositional tensions in a universalised dialectic. Transcending passing acts and local clashes of mere human strife, struggle is the very material and fabric of this imaginary world. Personified in the stressful unity of its labour force — the rising vortex of the central horse-and-rider figure — the city itself here becomes the heroic protagonist of frenetic energy, of agonising toil and of mechanised production. Distanced approximation or adaptation to scenic order is no longer a viable option for the browbeaten spectator.

9 Cf Poggi 2002 for an enthralling analysis of the political background of the notion of the crowd in Futurism.

## 5. The tumultuous crowd

Yet another alternative to scenic patterning stems from the picaresque tradition's characteristic image format of tumultuous crowds.<sup>10</sup> Here the crowd embodies an eruptive Dionysian vitality much more closely affined to Le Bon's anxieties about primitive regression mutating into insurrectionist behaviour. Its sources in the history of images can be traced back to the pulsating organic rhythms and grotesque bodies of Pieter Bruegel's dancing peasants and to the caricatured burlesques of comical satires *à la* William Hogarth or Honoré Daumier. In these forerunners' imagery, urban space and the urbane manners and disciplined bodies of well-behaved inhabitants are still valued as components of a civilising power directed against instinctual nature, disrupted and inverted in certain comical situations by rude peasant behaviour and grotesque lower-body functions.

In modern industrial cities the value of such distinctions is limited. George Grosz's *Widmung an Oskar Panizza* (Figure 18) is a key example of this tradition's typical strategies of inversion and spectator entrapment. With the sooty colours and torrid atmosphere of a *film noir* set, the painting elaborates a pulsating infernal vision of a topsy-turvy world of toppling buildings where a funeral procession readily turns into a riotous carnival. A biting satire of urban order collapsing into a shady, corrupt underworld ruled by Darwinian survival and Freudian drives, it arouses the ribald laughter of a jazz cabaret in which the city's obscene and corrupt belly is exposed.<sup>11</sup>

Snared in the coils of corruption, mortified spectators are tricked into realising their complicity in a universal regime of folly. Sightseer collusion in the tumultuous carnival's vital and carnal rhythms inevitably embroils the scenic prospector's distanced and totalising surveillance in the bloating cancerous growth of urban disorder. Apparently no more than a ludicrous case of collective psychotic delusion, panoptic scenic order serves only to mask the bitter reality of an upside-down world. South Africans are increasingly aware of a

10 Cf Hyman & Malbert 2000: 15. Hyman interprets Ensor's etching and painting of urban crowds, *The cathedral* (1886) and *Entry of Christ in Brussels in 1889* (1888) as typical examples of the picaresque tradition's tumultuous crowd.

11 For greater detail cf Van Niekerk 1987: 93-117 and Cornew 1999: 185-212.



Figure 18: George Grosz, *Widmung an Oskar Panizza* (1917/18). Oil on canvas, 140 by 110 cm. Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie (Roters 1982: 81).

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decaying public order's absurdities, and the abject feeling of descending into the pits of corruption. Hence, when crowds make an appearance in William Kentridge's satirical visions of deserted urban wastelands they tend to feature as abject rather than tumultuous masses (cf Cameron *et al* 1999).

## 6. The crowd in anarchy

A final alternative to scenic patterning is the hedonic tradition's image format of the anarchical crowd. James Ensor's *Entry of Christ in Brussels in 1889* (Figure 19) is perhaps the most celebrated example of an urban crowd in anarchy. This renowned painting shows a grand socialist parade usurping the authority of institutional religion's eschatonic doctrine. Imagined as an orgasmic explosion of radiant jets of vibrant tones and garish colour contrasts this anti-authoritarian spectacle of carnival Brussels as a latter-day secular Jerusalem is best described as an "erotic of materialism". It suggests the terminal break-up of an urban community — self-destructing like a blaze of fireworks, breaking down into a jumbled collection of decadent masks.



Figure 19: James Ensor, *The entry of Christ in Brussels in 1889* (1888). Oil on canvas, 260 by 430.5 cm. Antwerpen: Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

The pathos of spectators titillated and satiated by this ephemeral vision may be inferred from photographs of the studio of the aged Ensor. This painting was mounted above an organ, completely covering one wall. One of Ensor's last paintings, *The artist in his studio* (1935) shows the solitary figure of the wizened artist at the organ.<sup>12</sup> In earlier self-portraits the artist figure is contrasted with a surrounding field of threatening masks. The critical resistance has been dissipated in his last works. The reclusive artist is dominated by his magnum opus, succumbing to and assimilated into its psychedelic world of grotesque masks.

A comparable *carpe diem* vision of ultimate deconstruction and abandonment unfolds in *The great Koeberg switch-on*, a painting by the South African artist, Hardy Botha (Figure 20). The subject is a mammoth parade celebrating the opening of a nuclear power station in the region of the artist's home. Barely visible on the high horizon are the power station itself to the right and Table Mountain to the left. The visual anarchy of flashing fireworks, flickering lights, fantastic floats and the swirling crowd fills the entire area below the horizon. The event is depicted in sarcastic vein, in the guise of a gigantic terminal gala. The anarchic crowd's ravishing pleasure is but the foreplay to the final annihilation of any social order and authority whatsoever. For many the hedonistic escape route remains the only way to fulfilment — panoptic surveillance mutating into public fornication and titillating Big Brother voyeurism.

## 7. Conclusion

Typiconic formats in pictures of urban crowds are useful as hermeneutic keys for advancing the interpretation of visual art towards ideology critique. Their usefulness is by no means confined to the world of high art. As subliminal habits of the culturally literate imagination they are also crucial to the detection of ideological stances in popular visual culture and urban mass culture. A keen awareness of the imagination's historical habits may serve as an antidote to the ideological blindness with which we read crowds as one of the represented multitude. Not

12 *Ensor in zijn atelier* (1935). Oil on canvas, 80 by 100 cm. Aichi, Japan: Menard Art Museum.



Figure 20: Hardy Botha, *The great Koeberg switch-on* (1982-84). Oil on canvas, 98 by 112 cm. Johannesburg: Sasol Art Collection (Schmidt 1988: 23).

a cure as such, this awareness nevertheless facilitates the introduction of strategies of ideological resistance, including the discovery of interpretative frames for reading against the grain.

As has been demonstrated, the visual rhetoric of crowd images affects spectators in diverse ways. We may be urged to adapt to the integrative patterns of urban complexity; we may be painted into a corner as elected to or excluded from ideal communal harmony; we may find ourselves provoked into revolutionary action, trapped in insurrectionary tumult or swept along into anarchy. These options are also present in the operations of the mass media and thus more pervasive and insidious than if they were restricted to the élite world

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of high culture. Thus televised newscasts regularly alternate shots of single talking heads with crowd shots to set a scene by means of stock options regarding subject, camera angle and frame. Beginning with the anchor person and programme frames, these typically include reporter and background scenes, politicians and audiences, military commanders and combat zones, stars and adulating fans, catwalking models and *haute couture* agents, spokespersons and journalists. Calculated to manipulate audience reactions, the ideological stances of such packaged dialogues are often buried in the voice-over scenic shots. In the field of media literacy our awareness of the historical habits of the imagination can often be more decisive for effective ideological resistance than our ready knowledge about editorial machinations.



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