

SASCHA SIMONS

## The Ornament of Mass Customization On the Collective Consciousness of Dispersed Examiners

“When one wakes up, the first feeling that he experiences is that of the position of his body and limbs and his orientation in space in relation to the furniture, the walls of the bedroom, the window, etc. Here is the primordial foundation of our mental life; on this all the rest is built and it needs nothing more in order to appear. The same thing holds true of a group: the awareness that it develops of its structure and movements is at the base of all social life.”<sup>1</sup>

Whenever social protests have occurred in recent years, they have quickly been associated with catchwords and given labels such as “Twitter-Revolution,” “Facebook-Revolution,” or “YouTube-Revolution.” The increasing use of such catchwords does not merely reflect the profound changes that have taken place in medial relations but rather glorifies this change as the originator of social dynamics and simplifies the complex connections between social and medial upheavals in a manner that is as striking as it is one-sided. All the talk of hyphenated revolutions has not only brought about a rhetorical metamorphosis, whereby private corporations are now explicitly treated as major servants of the common good; it has also identified medial and social upheavals in such a manner as to leave little leeway for making differentiated statements about the involved collectives.

Admittedly, social functions have come to characterize the aesthetic forms of the Web 2.0 to an extent that is novel in terms of media history.<sup>2</sup> However, even though the distance between active participation and mediatized enthusiasm has been significantly reduced, there is – contrary to the narrative of medially determined revolutions – no certainty that the oppositional groups in Tehran, Cairo, or New York can be merged with the so called intelligent swarms of the social web and thus be regarded as a homogeneous collective subject – regardless of whether all of their activity was coordinated via mobile applications and appeared in network-based forms of representation. Certain questions remain: Do the masses on the street have any correspondence in the social media? What happens

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *Population and Society: Introduction to Social Morphology*, trans. Otis Dudley Duncan and Harold W. Pfautz (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), 200.

<sup>2</sup> See Stefan Münker, *Emergenz digitaler Öffentlichkeiten: Die Sozialen Medien im Web 2.0* (Frankfurt

to collective consciousness under the conditions of the social web? To what extent are smart mobs aware of their smartness, and what does it consist of?<sup>3</sup> In short: Who bears responsibility for the first element of these hyphenated revolutions, and according to what conventions do they behave?

The search for answers to these and similar questions must take into account the entanglement of medial and social forms: Today's protests are no longer merely characterized by a simultaneous "collective reception" (in Benjamin's sense),<sup>4</sup> but also by simultaneous and collective acts of production and distribution. More so than ever before, the Web 2.0 enables groups to come together around and by means of medial artefacts, the formation of which is largely left to their recipients. The social morphology of networks forms their sensually experienceable surfaces, and vice versa. On social network sites, blogs, and video portals, the implicit functional equivalence between mid-sized social habitus and medial form have become explicit, and it is now possible to sensually experience the modes of collective formation before every conceptual reflection.<sup>5</sup> Collective consciousness, as it is formulated by concepts of social networks, swarms, or multitudes, is sublated (*aufgehoben*) into media-aesthetic practices and the 'prosumer's' implicit knowledge of medial forms. The group figures that are formed by these examiners (in Walter Benjamin's sense), who are as distracted as they are dispersed, create latent socio-aesthetic structures that are actualized in an eventful manner and are capable of generating mobilization effects that are comparable to Elias Canetti's notion of "crowd crystals"<sup>6</sup> without similarly becoming identifiable or institutionalized. During the recent and ongoing instances of social unrest, it has been possible to observe how loosely connected collectives have become aware of their social situation. This awareness has had substantial consequences, and it is for this reason that the morphological dimensions of these protests should not be ignored. In order to analyze this process in an appropriate manner, it is thus necessary to take its collaborative composition seriously.

<sup>3</sup> See Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002), 157–82.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–251, at 235.

<sup>5</sup> Analogies between habitus and medial forms can be observed both at the level of descriptive language and at the level of object language. First, both function as a conceptual hinge between sociological or media-aesthetic micro-perspectives and macro-perspectives. Second, they equally designate phenomena of the cultural unconscious whose aesthetic conciseness depends on a non-conceptual *sensus communis*. See Pierre Bourdieu, "Structuralism and Theory of Sociological Knowledge," trans. Angela Zanotti-Karp, *Social Research* 35 (1968), 681–706, esp. 704–06; idem, "Postface to Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*," trans. Laurence Petit, in *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*, by Bruce Holsinger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 221–42 (Appendix II); and Rainer Leschke, *Medien und Formen: Eine Morphologie der Medien* (Konstanz: UVK, 2010), 70–71.

<sup>6</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 73–75.

### 1. *The Redundancy and Recursivity of the Mass Ornament 2.0*

This is precisely the approach taken by Natalie Bookchin in her video montage *Mass Ornament*.<sup>7</sup> Here the artist has compiled, in diachronic and synchronic rows, short YouTube videos of dancing adolescents in front of their webcams, and she has done so to reflect the ideas expressed by Siegfried Kracauer in his canonical essay of the same title. Kracauer's observations about the dance routines of the "Tiller Girls" provide a historical template that allows Bookchin to depict both the medial and aesthetic logic of web-based video platforms as well as the way that individual and collective identities are constructed on them. Like Kracauer's historical-material analysis, her aesthetic reconstruction is based entirely on the reflexivity of socio-economic relations as expressed in the forms of popular culture:

The YouTube dancer alone in her room, performing a dance routine that is both extremely private and extraordinarily public is, in its own way, a perfect expression of our age. Just as rows of spectators in the 1920s and 1930s sat in movie theaters and stadiums watching rows of bodies moving in formation, with YouTube videos, single viewers sit alone in front of computer screens watching individual dancers voluntarily moving in formation, alone in their rooms.<sup>8</sup>

Although, in both cases, the chosen surface analysis is (not coincidentally) focused on dancing figures as viewing material, my concentration below will not be on this particular form of selection but rather on the forms of its construction or composition.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the fact that both Kracauer and Bookchin are concerned with dancing bodies seems less important than the formal construction of their choreographies.

Kracauer, too, was not terribly interested in the dancers themselves, whom he regarded as acting entirely in the service of the ornament.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely in their denial of organic forms that the common rationality of industrial capitalism and the mass ornament is re-

<sup>7</sup> The montage can be viewed online at <http://bookchin.net/projects/massornament.html> (accessed on September 1, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Kane, "Dancing Machine: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin," *Rhizome.org* (May 27, 2009), <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/> (accessed on September 1, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> On the relationship among forms of selection, construction, and composition, see Leschke, *Medien und Formen*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly Kracauer's occasional asides about bodies and the "disposition of the soul" can be read as biopolitical sketches *avant le lettre*. See Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–88, at 79, 85. In this sense, Kracauer's contemporary Fritz Giese similarly regarded American "girl culture" to be an expression of the "collective workers" that fundamentally differs from Russian ballet, German body culture, and French variety shows. See Fritz Giese, *Girlkultur: Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischem und europäischem Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl* (Munich: Delphin, 1925), 83, 9–11. As media of self control, bodies dancing in web videos thus warrant a study of their own, but this will have to be undertaken elsewhere. In this regard, reference should be made to Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, "Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube," in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 187–203.

vealed. According to Kracauer, the individual dancers cannot be identified as individuals, nor is it possible to identify a single intention that is given expression within the dance. An end in itself, the mass ornament is pure surface, and one searches in vain for any indication of its content:

The end result is the ornament, whose closure is brought about by emptying all the substantial constructs of their contents. Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through. As linear as it may be, there is no line that extends from the small sections of the mass to the entire figure.<sup>11</sup>

The mass ornament thus proves to be an emergent phenomenon, one in which there is no path that leads from its higher social grouping back to its individual elements. The unity of the ornament remains closed. It is only by imagining a bird's eye view of it that, according to Kracauer, the motions of the individuals come to form a homogeneous relation between the parts and the whole – just as it is only the surveillance flights of historical materialism that allows to reach the heights necessary for observing “the undistorted truth” lying behind “the *rational and empty form* of the cult” in the light of reason.<sup>12</sup> Kracauer goes on:

The production process runs its secret course in public. Everyone does his or her task on the conveyer belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself.<sup>13</sup>

Kracauer thus has in mind a sort of hidden choreographer that, though being up to no good, nevertheless guarantees a degree of formal unity within the social ornament. Bookchin, who rather invokes a medial than a historical materialism, dissolves this authorial position in terms that are reminiscent of Michel Foucault:

There is no need for a director or choreographer (or foreman) to keep production flowing or to keep the dancers moving in sync. It is a perfectly individualized self-generated, self-replicating system.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of suggesting a central controlling authority or a hierarchically organized type of discipline, the dance videos are rather indicative of the recursive operational mode of governmental control.<sup>15</sup> This can only be observed because Bookchin occupies the vacant

<sup>11</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Kane, “Dancing Machine: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin,” n.p.

<sup>15</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” trans. Pascuale Pasquino, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104, esp. 100–04. For specific applications of Foucault's concept of governmentality to user generated

position of author or originator under the protective aegis of the art system. The sort of authorship practiced here, however, is based less on the originality of artistic genius than it is on Bookchin's ability to select, organize, and contextualize materials, an ability that would suit the job profile of a curator or editor. Bookchin uses her knowledge of the audio-visual products of our mediatised everyday life and their design patterns to give a surface to the process of collectivization that is coordinated by means of such footage. The unity of the social ornament, which Kracauer was still able to rely on, here has to be restored out of the presumed isolation of private bedrooms. Its shape is not due to a subsequent establishment of a center or to a fixation of social dynamics but rather to mere redundancy and recursivity – or to “the ornamental,” in Niklas Luhmann's terminology.<sup>16</sup>

Only through repetition does it become clear that the apparently isolated dancers on YouTube form a figure whose identity systematically evades both the dancers and their observers. The constructive principle of this mass ornament 2.0 is that of self-similarity. What makes the “mash up” memorable is the redundant form of its *mise en scène*, *mise en cadre*, and montage. Each with the grainy footage of a webcam, the different videos depict surface images that are nearly identically structured. By arranging them into uniform rows, Bookchin is thus able to produce a morphological connection between the YouTube dancers and the “pure assemblage” of chorus lines.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, she compounds the movements on the surface of the videos with the corresponding dynamic of her arrangement. In this way, *Mass Ornament* radicalizes merely a fundamental analogous relationship that exists between the different videos, but it does so in a virtuoso manner. The result is a high degree of order and thus an aesthetic difference from the normal operations of YouTube.

The incorporation of video samples from YouTube's “suggestions,” which are presented to the right of the main framework, creates image-to-image relations that underscore the constitutive significance of contoured formal borders, especially in light of the permeable interfaces of the internet: There is no image without a frame, and there is no web video without a video frame. Thanks to the redundancy of forms, moreover, Bookchin is also able to translate the informational space of user interfaces and the structure of databases into the simultaneity of split screens. Thus she stresses the spatial organization of online audience flow. Contrary to diachronic television programs, which are oriented toward continuity, YouTube and other video platforms continuously present similar videos and thus always direct the attention toward an imperative of alternatives, in order to lure their users into the infinitude of their archives:

---

content in general – and to dance videos on YouTube in particular – see Peters and Seier, “Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube,” 201; and Ramón Reichert, *Amateure im Netz: Selbstmanagement und Wissenstechnik im Web 2.0* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 13–14.

<sup>16</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 220.

<sup>17</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” 76.

The arrangement of multiple clips in a single row across the screen mimics a chorus line but it also reflects the viewing conditions of YouTube, where videos are shown with an accompanying row of thumbnail images linking seemingly similar videos. The installation progresses from one video to many, reflecting the culture of video sharing, where one video can produce chain reactions – that can include hundreds of copies, responses, and variations.<sup>18</sup>

The social foundations and conditions of media use are thus taken into account not only by the display of “view counts” but above all by the repetition and self-referentiality of the videos, which reflect upon the analogous nature of the distributional and reduplicative excesses that exist on the social web.

The medial framework of the video frame thereby becomes the object of an aesthetic inversion. The forms of borders or edges are transformed into the formed center. By means of its recursivity, the video compilation makes visible and audible the phenomenological, media-technological, and social conditions of its visibility and audibility.<sup>19</sup> That this constructive principle is not only applicable to dancing teenagers – but is just as fitting for other forms of material – can be demonstrated with a comparison to similar “mash ups.”<sup>20</sup> This is because the contrastive multiplication of videos relaxes their object of reference; they gain a degree of autonomy beyond their context and come to present themselves in the formal character alone. Instead of fading away behind a symbolic function, the screen is rather dominated by analogy, redundancy, and recursive closure. The web videos processed here are highly compatible because their content has been vacated. They are compatible, in other words, because they have been made into ornaments.

## *II. On the Social Reflexivity, Public, and Individuality of Mass Ornaments*

How is it possible, however, to go beyond the matter of purely aesthetic immanence in order to examine the social reflexivity of the ornament, as both Kracauer and Bookchin claim to do? Can the historical place of our epoch truly be detected in them, just as Kracauer, with some confidence, saw his own era reflected in the mass ornaments of the time? In order to come close to answering such questions and to draw a connection between Kracauer and Bookchin, it is first necessary to free Kracauer’s cultural-sociological diagnosis from the bounds of his teleological philosophy of history. Throughout her work, Bookchin indeed makes connections between comparable circumstances. However, whereas she allows perceptible forms to speak for the socio-cultural context of their development, Kracauer’s reflections rely on written analysis. Accordingly, she is unable able to offer any radical

---

<sup>18</sup> Kane, “Dancing Machine: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin,” n.p.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar argument, see Brian Willems, “Increasing the Visibility of Blindness: Natalie Bookchin’s Mass Ornament,” in *Video Vortex Reader II*, ed. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 293–305, esp. 304–05.

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin’s related projects – *Testament* (2009), *Now He’s Out in Public and Everyone Can See* (2012), and *Long Story Short* (2013) – can be viewed online at <http://bookchin.net/projects> (accessed on September 2, 2014).

solutions to the problems that she has identified. Then again, it is precisely because her work depends on medial self-descriptions that she is able to offer significant insight concerning the interrelations of economic forms, social formations, and the dynamics of medial forms without having to make salvific claims in the name of reason (*à la* Kracauer) and without falling victim to the sort of media determinism that emanates from California.

In order to do justice to the socio-political dimension of Bookchin's work, both of the mass ornaments under discussion here have to be interrogated on the basis of the concepts of *individuality* and the *public* that are communicated by them. A historical comparison will allow conclusions to be reached about the changes that have taken place in social visibility and collective consciousness. It will also shed light on the disappointments of the emancipatory expectations of the past and point to new political potentialities. In this regard it will be instructive to refer to the work of Gabriel Tarde, who was deeply concerned with the mediation between *crowds*, the *public*, and *individuality*. His sociology of imitation provides an appropriate conceptual framework for examining both the social-theoretical issues and the media-aesthetic phenomena that are at stake here. The currency of Tarde's theories is evidenced by the fact that they are just as useful for explaining the present media-historical circumstances as they are for clarifying those of the Weimar Republic described by Kracauer.

Because, in Kracauer's opinion, the public staging of capitalist rationality results in significant gains with respect to aesthetic realism and social transparency, he obviously sees no need to forsake his bourgeois distance and infiltrate the private spheres of individual crowd members. For him it is rather the case that *all of reality is public*. The "formal principle" of capitalist production, on which masses are modelled, corresponds to "the same rationality that controls the bearers of the patterns in real life."<sup>21</sup> Work and leisure are subjected to the same rhythm of Tayloristic rationalization. Fritz Giese, who was Kracauer's contemporary, based his comparative analysis of German and American "girl culture" on a similar notion. For him, the developmental state of a nation's culture, technology, and economy had to be observed in the "marginal zones of being" and described in terms of phenomena that are "complementary to the official culture of technology and economics."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," 79, 85. At best, the distinction between the visible and hidden realms of this public reality can be reconceived as an incorporation of the (invisible) private sphere into a broader understanding of the public sphere and thus as a sort of "re-entry" of the distinction between social visibility and invisibility.

<sup>22</sup> Giese, *Girlkultur*, 14–15. In this regard, both Giese and Kracauer refer to the strikingly anti-erotic nature of the Tiller Girls. As "dancing machines," the latter are not meant to be sexually stimulating; rather, they are representative of the "collective of all technology," which Giese considered to be the new basis of human culture (see *ibid.*, 83, 119, 141–42). Despite their common premises Giese and Kracauer came to diametrically opposite conclusions: While Kracauer believed in the inevitability of the revolutionary progress, Giese was concerned about the total manageability of society and the stabilization of production conditions. See Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit, 1924–1932: Studien zur Literatur des "Weissen Sozialismus"*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1975), 43.

Even though it would seem obvious to apply this notion of a public without boundaries tacitly to the present situation, it is first necessary to understand certain factors that have led to a significant shift in the relations between the public and the private. Initially, users imitate conventionalized poses and gestures from the repertoire of popular culture. These mimetic appropriations are then established, by their constant repetition, as virally distributed memes. The private appropriation of a public model is thus reinjected into the public realm of communication. The public sphere of social network sites, however, does not develop naturally or organically (if such a simplification will be allowed here for the sake of brevity); rather, it is founded or endowed (*gestiftet*). It is controlled by the private corporation Google, which, for providing the communicative infrastructure of the video platform, rewards itself by maintaining extensive control over its user data. In this context, Mark Andrejevic has turned to the Marxist concept of primitive accumulation, which manifests itself today as a sort of “digital enclosure”:

Contrary to conventional wisdom, social networking sites do not publicize community but rather privatize it. In that the digital production of online communities takes place within a private corporate structure, such sites are able to appropriate and use the power of communities for commercial purposes. Their ability to gain control over this information is at least partially based on their “free” access and on their user agreements, the conditions of which are set by the commercial enterprises that control the resources for forming communities. Commercial social networking sites are presumably communal productions, except when it comes down to establishing user conditions and sharing the profits that they generate.<sup>23</sup>

The public sphere of the Web 2.0 has been increasingly structured according the model of the shopping mall and not according to the model of the agora. Its conditions for participation are only as transparent as the terms that are established by the large network providers, which, as far as the rights of users are concerned, can hardly be interested in tipping the balance of power against their favor.<sup>24</sup> Kracauer’s diagnosis, namely that the “production process runs its secret course in public,”<sup>25</sup> must therefore be expanded to include not only immaterial goods and services but also the private spheres of social individuals. The home, which has been integrated into the process of creating value, is consequently treated by Bookchin as a key actor in its own right. The distinction between the public and the private is embedded into a more comprehensive and entirely commercialized sphere of *privatized public intimacy*. Within this sphere, the users of certain services have become the providers of these services and, to the extent that they have accepted the terms of participating on a social web governed by large corporations, they

<sup>23</sup> Mark Andrejevic, “Facebook als neue Produktionsweise,” in *Generation Facebook: Über das Leben im Social Net*, ed. Oliver Leistert and Theo Röhle (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 31–49, at 43.

<sup>24</sup> See Oliver Leistert and Theo Röhle, “Identifizieren, Verbinden, Verkaufen: Einleitendes zur Maschine Facebook, ihren Konsequenzen und den Beiträgen in diesem Band,” in *ibid.*, 7–30, esp. 16; and Mirko Tobias Schäfer’s contribution to the present volume.

<sup>25</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” 78.



THE OBJECTIVE

(must) offer their activity for sale as a sort of good. Even though it is hardly transparent, the promise of inclusion, with which the growing data economy entices its customers, is in fact quite extensive. Whereas algorithmic routines process critical or subversive content with formalistic indifference, the companies are reluctant to reveal the composition of their data sets to the very people who produce them. That which is publically accessible is typically restricted to the interfaces on which users gather to attract one another's attention. In this case, the reduction of the user to clusters or portfolios of data is counterpoised by the users' pursuit of affiliation and individual differentiation through their communication of personal achievements, opinions, and daily activity. The generation of "big data" remains dependent on the interplay between public participation and social distinction. Its de-subjectifying effects are driven by the promise of participation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the differentiating self-reassurance of the individual in relation to his or her group of fellow participants.

The economic motivation of this promise, however, approximates a degree of distrust toward the affective connection between users and networks: The evaluation or analysis of web-based interactions seems to impede, in advance, the fulfillment of the desired prospect of participation and, in doing so, to renew its demand in a perpetual manner. Quite literally, this practice would thus profit from a sort of desire whose supplementary *telos* would be an equitable community of intersubjective recognition, even though it contaminates the very conditions that would enable such a community to form. However, the idea that such practices function to hollow out this ideal of community must remain a mere matter of suspicion, at least while the relationship between the individual and the group remains unclear. Before it is possible to clarify the problem of social visibility within these processes with an eye toward understanding the political potential of web-based collectives, the historical forms of the mass ornament must first be interrogated in terms of the concepts of individuality that find expression in them.

Kracauer expressly forgoes a prominent *topos* of crowd psychology, namely that the bourgeois subject needs to be defended against the collective irrationality and manipulability of the crowd.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, his argument against the social reflexivity and significance of art betrays a degree of skepticism as regards bourgeois culture and its definitive protagonist, the subject. "As a total personality – that is, as a harmonious union of nature and 'spirit',"<sup>27</sup> this subject is adequate neither for the age of capitalism nor for the age of reason that Kracauer is heralding. For though the mass ornament must renounce this utopian hope for a new humanity on account of its unilaterally instrumental implications, the abstract formalism of its aesthetic principle distinguishes it from a work of art in that it sufficiently "reduces the natural"<sup>28</sup> and ensures that "[t]he surface-level expressions, [...] by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental

---

<sup>26</sup> See Hannelore Bublitz, *In der Zerstreuung organisiert: Phantasmen und Paradoxien der Massenkultur* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," 83.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

substance of the state of things.”<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the self-conception of bourgeois cultural products, the surface of the mass ornament thus offers “conclusive testimony about [the] overall constitution”<sup>30</sup> of an era whose capitalist and social state of development shows no consideration for the organic or spiritual-intellectual (*geistige*) identity of mankind:

Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure. [...] The Tiller Girls can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact. Their mass gymnastics are never performed by the fully preserved bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition.<sup>31</sup>

Here Kracauer makes a valuable reference concerning the reduction of the individual bearers of the mass ornament into even smaller parts, an idea that Gilles Deleuze would later revive in his description of the “dividuality” that is characteristic of crowds in so-called societies of control. Kracauer himself, however, does not follow this line of thinking but rather concentrates on the transcendence of the individual dimension in the unity of the ornament.

Whereas Kracauer dissolves the autonomous subject in the undifferentiated nature of the formed masses, Bookchin confronts viewers with a dynamic sort of interaction between parts and the whole. Contrary to Kracauer’s historical prognosis, the mass ornament of today is more tolerant regarding the integrity or intactness of the body and the identity of its parts. In light of the transformed conditions of production and distribution, it is tempting to believe that the individual is now stronger than ever before.<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, recipients have in fact experienced some appreciation for their control over the media of production and distribution, and this appreciation has not simply been rhetorical. However, the idea that this alone has resulted in an impetus for political emancipation must be cast into doubt in light of the asymmetric balance of power, mentioned above, between the rights held by website operators and the rather meager rights reserved for their users. Also Bookchin’s formal-aesthetic analyses dampen any euphoria over the emancipation of recipients.<sup>33</sup> With the public intimacy of their webcams, the users admittedly present themselves as individuals. In doing so, however, they simultaneously commit themselves to serving the purpose of the mass ornament. In Bookchin’s perspective of morphological constellations, the ostensible individuality of emancipated prosumers is revealed to

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 76, 78.

<sup>32</sup> For an argument in favor of this position, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 24.

<sup>33</sup> They also put into perspective one-sided pessimistic diagnoses, such as Jürgen Habermas’ dismissive remarks about the online public sphere. See Jürgen Habermas, “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research,” *Communication Theory* 16 (2006), 411–26, at 423–24 (note 3).

be a mere effect of the redundancy and conventionality of medial forms. If one follows Kracauer's critical model, their freedom seems to correspond precisely to the freedom of interchangeable modules in variable production processes. In the mass ornament 2.0, it is no longer the logic of industrial mass production that finds expression but rather the logic of mass customization. This logic diverges from the rigid linearity of assembly lines and at the same time extends them to the consumers. The allegedly emancipated users have become productive, in the truest sense of the word. Their individuality serves as ennobling seal of still mass-produced and uniformly finished products.

### *III. From the Crowd to the Public ... and Back?*

The suggestive sounds of cultural criticism have emphatically drawn attention to the close connection between the mass ornament and forms of production. Although such sounds have muffled any doubts concerning the economic foundation of sociality on the Web 2.0, they are hardly receptive to the possible dissonances that might arise from the oppositional potential of these dynamics. A differentiated description of the social functions and effects of the ornament of mass customization thus requires a vocabulary that, in normative terms, is somewhat less captious. To this end it will be fruitful to revisit Tarde's comparative treatment of the crowd and the public.

In the context of mass phenomena, Tarde's is an interesting name because, along with Scipio Sighele and Gustave Le Bon, he is considered one of the pioneers of crowd psychology. Like Sighele's *La folla delinquente* ("The Criminal Crowd"), Tarde's early studies were motivated by criminology and concerned with the individual accountability of those who participated in mass crimes.<sup>34</sup> In clarifying the question of guilt he relied on a decidedly sociological approach that took into account the influence of social milieus and opposed Sighele's positivistic preference for criminal-anthropological axioms. Admittedly, Tarde's publications from the early 1890s stress the irrationality and danger of crowds in phrases and metaphors that are as drastic as they are pessimistic. At the same time, however, these works place the crowd within a framework of general social theory that goes beyond crowd psychology. Thus they pursue an objective that, all superficial similarities aside, could not differ more from Le Bon's efforts to interpret the crowd as an overarching explanation for any kind of social phenomena.<sup>35</sup> If Tarde conceives of the crowd as an urban nucleus of social interrelations – the rural counterpart to which would

<sup>34</sup> See Gabriel Tarde, *Penal Philosophy*, trans. Rapelje Howell (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912); idem, *Études pénales et sociales* (Lyon: A. Stork, 1892); and idem, "Les crimes des foules," *Archives de l'anthropologie criminelle* 7 (1892), 353–86. On Tarde's role in the development of this international discourse, see Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Michael Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben: Eine Diskurs- und Imaginationsgeschichte der Menschenmenge, 1765–1930* (Munich: W. Fink, 2007), 407–25; and Stefanie Middendorf, *Massenkultur: Zur Wahrnehmung gesellschaftlicher Modernität in Frankreich, 1880–1980* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 53–72.

<sup>35</sup> See Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 434.

be the family – he does not do so to treat it as an ineluctable medium of the social (in Le Bon's sense). Rather, he does so because the crowd, by virtue of the physical proximity of its members and despite all of its destructive tendencies, enhances and multiplies the universal processes of imitation that he described in his *Laws of Imitation* as being a constitutive element of social processuality. According to Urs Stäheli, whose reading of Tarde has informed my considerations below, Tarde's assessment of the crowd is somewhat ambivalent: It is both a "venue of destructive forces" as well as an "epistemologically privileged setting."<sup>36</sup> Some degree of this ambiguity can already be found in Tarde's early writings, but its major consequences would not be felt until the publication of *L'opinion et la foule* ("Opinion and the Crowd").<sup>37</sup> The following considerations are thus less concerned with his positions within the discourse of crowd psychology than they are with his broader understanding of the public, which Tarde introduced as a complementary concept to the crowd in order to do justice to the medial innovations of the press. Tarde was interested in the reconfiguration of the technical mechanisms of book printing, telegraphy, and the railroad, which were materialized and institutionalized in the daily newspapers, primarily because of their social resonances, which had escaped the notice of his contemporary crowd theorists. For the collective addressed by the press transcends the conditions of copresence and exclusive participation that bind together the members of a crowd.

As Canetti observed, an assembled crowd is a phenomenon of increased density. It is only intensive physical contact that levels out individual distinctions and generates a sense of equality within an undifferentiated crowd. In contrast to this situation, the public sphere addressed by the press is spatio-temporally dispersed and thus allows its members to participate simultaneously in a variety of publics. Tarde, who recognized an essential aspect of modernity in this medially induced differentiation of public spheres, thus considered the findings of crowd psychology to be historically obsolete. Accordingly, his assessment of Le Bon's famous thesis concerning "the era of crowds" was unequivocal: "La foule est le groupe social du passé [...]."<sup>38</sup> For Tarde his time had been characterized

<sup>36</sup> Urs Stäheli, "Übersteigerte Nachahmung – Tardes Massentheorie," in *Soziologie der Nachahmung und des Begehrens: Materialien zu Gabriel Tarde*, ed. Christian Borch and Urs Stäheli (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 397–416, at 410.

<sup>37</sup> This book also contains an explicit revision of his previous pessimism about crowds. This is true above all in the case of celebratory crowds, which Tarde here describes as a representation of naturally coalescing sociality in and of itself. In terms of their social productivity, Tarde values the harmonious and peaceful effects of these self-referential and affectionate crowds more highly than the destructive consequences of the crimes studied by crowd psychologists. See Gabriel Tarde, *L'opinion et la foule: Théoricien de l'opinion* (1901; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), 26, 61. See also Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 480–82; Stäheli, "Übersteigerte Nachahmung," 408–10; and idem, "Emergenz und Kontrolle in der Massenpsychologie," in *Schwärme, Kollektive ohne Grenzen: Eine Wissensgeschichte zwischen Leben und Information*, ed. Eva Horn and Lucas Marco Gisi (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 85–100, esp. 97–98.

<sup>38</sup> Tarde, *L'opinion et la foule*, 12. See Gustave Le Bon, *Psychology of Crowds* (Southampton: Sparkling, 2009), 7 (the original French version of this book was published in 1895; the translator of the English version is anonymous).

by a public that was pluralistic and functionally differentiated. As a specifically modern formation of the social, the nineteenth-century public inherited a majority of the functions that, during the eighteenth century, had been ascribed exclusively to the crowd, but it did not share the latter's excessively irrational and subversive characteristics. For, although the public was able to fuse together the convictions and desires of large masses of people, this "simple and powerful common opinion" did not come at the expense of individual differences. This civilizing "progress toward tolerance" allowed Tarde to view the crowd, in retrospect, as something other than a mere effect or indicator of social decay.<sup>39</sup> Instead, Tarde described the historical and social interplay that took place between the crowd and the public sphere, and his insights remain significant and applicable to the situation today.<sup>40</sup>

Within Tarde's sociological theory of evolution, the crowd necessarily precedes the genesis of the public. The crowd (especially the urban crowd) and the experiences of social quantity, density, and indifference that accompany it create developmental and logical conditions for the public. In light of the ideal conditions for imitation within the crowd itself, it can even be interpreted as a fundamental model for a type of sociality that is formed on the basis of social mimesis. Tarde thus rehabilitated the exceptional nature of crowds as the "keystone of a theory of modern society."<sup>41</sup> Although its ability to conduct "action à distance" distinguished the public sphere as a higher order of social organization, it nevertheless required a habitualized suggestion of proximity, as offered by the crowd. The public must therefore remain connected to its historical precursor. It is a media-technologically "dispersed crowd" (*foule dispersée*)<sup>42</sup> – that is simultaneously a "virtual crowd" (*foule virtuelle*)<sup>43</sup> able to act as an actual crowd even if it cannot be recognized as such. Within the public sphere, the social heritage of the crowd has not been overcome or abolished; it has rather been sublated (*aufgehoben*) and can be reactivated, depending on the external circumstances, from this latent condition. Thus transposed into a different social state of aggregation, the ephemeral phenomenon of the crowd can be also conserved after its physical dissolution without having to rely on being one of the limited and institutionalized communities that Canetti refers to as crowd crystals.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Tarde, *L'opinion et la foule*, 13, 19.

<sup>40</sup> On the crowd as a systems-theoretical figure of dedifferentiation (*Entdifferenzierungsfigur*) and as the outer side of the public, see Urs Stäheli, "Das Populäre in der Systemtheorie," in *Luhmann und die Kulturtheorie*, ed. Günter Burkart and Gunter Runkel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 169–88.

<sup>41</sup> Stäheli, "Übersteigerte Nachahmung," 405.

<sup>42</sup> Tarde, *L'opinion et la foule*, 30.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 73–75. In a side note, Canetti also recognizes "the newspaper reading public" to be a virtual crowd (see *ibid.*, 52). His disdainful assessment of this "baiting crowd," which is admittedly stable but lacks any responsibility, could not be more different from Tarde's. In this regard, see also Susanne Lüdemann, "Unsichtbare Massen," in *Masse und Medium: Verschiebungen in der Ordnung des Wissens und der Ort der Literatur, 1800/2000*, ed. Inge Münz-Koenen and Wolfgang Schäffner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 81–91.

The condition for this is that Tarde not only recognizes the individuals gathered in the public sphere as a virtual crowd in their totality; he also regards each individual being a crowd itself, namely an intellectual or “cerebral crowd” (*foule cérébrale*) – meaning that each individual’s brain is steeped in with a multitude of collective beliefs and desires that float the social world.<sup>45</sup> Due to this affective openness to others’ suggestions individuals take part in various public spheres at the same time. In contrast to the pre-dominant understanding of physical crowds, these dispersed and intellectual crowds do not demand to gather physically and to give up individual capacities, but shape their participants’ capacities inherently and independently from physical encounters.<sup>46</sup> The individual does not function as the original point of departure for social processes but rather as a temporarily stabilized culmination point of universal currents of belief and desire that are disseminated by means of social imitative practices and that are the driving forces behind society and history alike.<sup>47</sup> It is rather the case that Tarde’s sociological adaptation of Leibniz’s speculative natural philosophy does not allow for any irreducible minimal units whatsoever. According to Tarde, the basis of all sociality is formed by a network of interpenetrating monads that are in no way closed off or limited, as Leibniz had thought them to be: “At the basis of each thing are all real or possible things. [...] But this implies first of all that *everything is a society*, that every phenomenon is a social fact.”<sup>48</sup>

Tarde’s radical micro-sociology is not only applicable and valuable to Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory;<sup>49</sup> it can also shed light on the mass ornaments of industrial society and on those of our present network society. For, according to Tarde’s line of thinking, the individual and the crowd are phenomena that can be translated into one another and whose comparable nature is ensured by the medium of social mimesis:

But when, instead of patterning one’s self after one person or after a few, we borrow from a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand persons, each of whom is considered under a particular aspect, the elements of thought or action which we subsequently combine, the very nature and choice of these elementary copies, as well as their combination, expresses and accentuates our original personality. And this is, perhaps, the chief benefit that results from the prolonged action of imitation.<sup>50</sup>

The basis for “all social resemblances” is formed by social imitation, i.e. a sequence of mimetic acts that always refer to previous imitations or counter-imitations – even if these

<sup>45</sup> Tarde, *Études pénales et sociales*, 292. See also Stäheli, “Übersteigerte Nachahmung,” 400–01. On the brain as an organ of repetition, see Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Clews Parsons (New York: Holt and Company, 1903), 74–88.

<sup>46</sup> See Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 483–84. See also *ibid.*, 475–76.

<sup>47</sup> See Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 37, 144–45; and *idem*, *Monadology and Sociology*, trans. Theo Lorenc (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2012), 16–17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>49</sup> See Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” in *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Patrick Joyce (New York: Routledge, 2002), 117–32.

<sup>50</sup> Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, xxiv.

happen to be inventions that, though admittedly necessary for the dynamic of society, can nevertheless be explained as having derived from the innovative concurrence of mimetic activity.<sup>51</sup> For Tarde, imitation serves as the “the most general and abstract fundamental concept for the smallest social unit” and allows continuous scaling to take place between the individual and national societies, crowds, and publics.<sup>52</sup>

The latter are privileged spaces in Tarde’s sociology. In various ways, both the crowd and the public provide especially favorable conditions for the dissemination of social imitation. The crowd demonstrates its modernity not only through its volatility and suddenness but above all because it renounces, more fervently than any other collective, the personality and social background of the individual. In doing so, it neutralizes the individual as an agent of self-referential and mutually self-contaminating processes of imitation. It is in a crowd that social mimesis achieves its maximum intensity. What is missed there is the “extensive dynamic” that characterizes, in the public sphere, the synchronization of dispersed individuals.<sup>53</sup> There, due to the support of media technology, imitation transcends the local limitation of immediate social contact in favor of a tendentially universal dissemination whose actual magnitude is coextensively bound to the dissemination media in question. It is this “suggestion at a distance”<sup>54</sup> that actualizes Tarde’s definition of imitation as “the action at a distance of one mind upon another” without essentially forfeiting the excessive contagious potential of the crowd.<sup>55</sup> Because, in the public sphere, suggestion and imitation do not require physical contact, the process of infection or contagion is accordingly invisible. Quite literally, the public sphere provides a “suggestibilité purement idéale.”<sup>56</sup>

In sum: Whereas the crowd, on account of its self-referential homogeneity, presents an ideal milieu for imitation, the public sphere is no less ideal on account of its lack of physical contact. Stäheli has drawn attention to yet another decisive distinction. Because of its spatial tolerance and plural constitution, the public sphere proves to be susceptible

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 14, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Stäheli, “Übersteigerte Nachahmung,” 411. Along with Georg Simmel Tarde can be considered as one of the pioneers of aesthetic sociology, since he borrowed the main concept of his sociology from aesthetic theory; and he assigned great significance to the morphology of art or beauty as a genuine object of imitation. See Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 51–58; and Georg Simmel, “Sociological Aesthetics,” in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. K. P. Etkorn (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 68–80. It might be promising to revisit this neglected sociological project in order to readjust the theories of modernity and social practices in light of the aestheticized present. For an argument in favor of renewing sociological aesthetics, see Andreas Reckwitz’s chapter “Elemente einer Soziologie des Ästhetischen” in his book *Unscharfe Grenzen: Perspektiven der Kultursoziologie* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 259–82.

<sup>53</sup> Stäheli, “Übersteigerte Nachahmung,” 412. On the importance of dissemination media in Tarde’s work, especially as regards the theory of inclusion, see Urs Stäheli, “Der Takt der Börse: Inklusions-Effekte von Verbreitungsmedien am Beispiel des Börsen-Tickers,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 33 (2004), 245–63, esp. 245.

<sup>54</sup> Tarde, *L’opinion et la foule*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, xiv.

<sup>56</sup> Tarde, *L’opinion et la foule*, 10.

to interferences from various currents of belief and desire. These intersections and overlappings result in inventions that aspire, in turn, to multiply and reproduce themselves by means of imitation. Within Tarde's conceptual architecture, invention serves as an indispensable complementary concept to imitation because it provides social associations with a measure of heterogeneity and asymmetry that enables social progress.<sup>57</sup> His sociology of imitation also happens to be a sociology of imitative errors. Because of its self-referential coherence, the "excessive and more intensive form of imitation,"<sup>58</sup> which is prevalent in crowds, does not represent a fitting milieu for such mistakes, which are integral to the social dynamic. It is only the irritation of large-scale suggestion that opens up a space of possibility for innovation and critique, which otherwise remain inaccessible to the crowd.<sup>59</sup> In comparison to the crowd, the public thus offers not only better conditions for the remote coordination of society but also the condition of possibility for oppositional action. Though this does not mean, of course, that such opposition cannot be realized in the form of a crowd.

#### *IV. Dispersed and Distracted Examiners: The Public of the Social Web*

The present state of argumentation cannot satisfactorily explain whether or how this potential for opposition will be actualized. First it is necessary to clarify how Tarde's sociological speculations are relevant to the two types of mass ornament that are being compared here. Kracauer's diagnosis can benefit, above all, from Tarde's concept of individuality. Both of them oppose the idea of an autonomous subject as something to be defended against the frenzy of the crowd. The opposition between the individual and the crowd, which formerly seemed indispensable, has been undermined by the increase in social mediatization. Hannelore Bublitz has described this process as the dispersion and distraction of the physical crowd, which has been replaced by a biopolitical instrument of regulation for the circular self-control of the individual and society. This dynamic "medium of social normalization"<sup>60</sup> presents individuals with the possibility of distinguishing themselves and thereby – in an only apparently paradoxical manner – provides them with the possibility of connecting to society. However, this connection does not take place in the form of a clearly defined and spatio-temporally situated body, as imagined by the psychology and phenomenology of crowds, but rather as a cluster of references for the obligatory normality of society. For Bublitz, the crowd functions both as a supplement to the individual and as an imaginary form of perceiving a generalized "other." It is a biopolitical feature that pervades every element of mass culture:

Thus a new type of subjectivity is established: The individual does not then "disappear" in the maelstrom of the crowd; rather, the crowd is embedded into the individual. It constitutes the

<sup>57</sup> See Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 69–73.

<sup>58</sup> Stäheli, "Übersteigerte Nachahmung," 403.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>60</sup> Bublitz, *In der Zerstreuung organisiert*, 62



functional medium for the establishment of individual dispositions, which are due to a radical dynamization – to a practice of normalizing subjectivization. The crowd is characterized by the fact that individuals situate themselves within fields of normality, compare their own positions to the imagined positions of others, and adjust themselves accordingly.<sup>61</sup>

In this regard, Gamper has pointed out the discourse-historical affinity that exists between Tarde and Kracauer. Both of them, he notes, were seeking an explanation for the “establishment of a sort of social conformism [...] that occurs independently from a gathering of large numbers of people.”<sup>62</sup> Tarde’s model could be used to fill a gap in Kracauer’s argumentation. Kracauer, according to Gamper, “admittedly acknowledges the historical advancement of the new, outward-oriented subjectivity of the ‘dispersed masses,’ but he is unwilling to attribute any autonomous meaning to it.”<sup>63</sup> In turn, Kracauer’s fascinating descriptions of the Weimar Republic can provide Tarde’s sociological speculations with an extensive empirical basis. It is of no consequence that the Tayloristic rationalization of its subjects, as described by Kracauer, took place under the conditions of dispersion and distraction, and this is because the terms *foule dispersée* and *foule cérébrale* anticipate both the physical disposition of dispersion as well as its psychological counterpart, distraction. The presumably new form of mass individuality, which dominates the workplaces and entertainment venues in Kracauer’s account, seems to be embedded in a socio-historical development whose continuity can be traced up to the present day and whose major moments have been closely associated with the introduction of new dissemination media – with the newspaper in the case of Tarde, with the cinema in the case of Kracauer, and with web videos in Bookchin’s case.<sup>64</sup> Whereas the press first enabled the social synchronization of dispersed masses, and Kracauer’s focus was on the distraction that characterizes urban locations, the present socio-medial constellation radicalizes

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>62</sup> Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 475.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>64</sup> This three-step characterization of media history fails to account for the television, even though it mediates between the distributional features of the newspaper and the audiovisual experience of the cinema and, what is more, could be regarded as having been the epitome of mass media for decades. But precisely its role as a leading medium prevents me here from discussing the television in any detail. It lies beyond the scope of the present study. For the same reason, I will not be able to give consideration to David Riesman’s concept of externally-governed individuality. Riesman’s idea of the lonely crowd could not only be said to flank, in sociological terms, the vacancy of television; it could also be regarded as an extension of the discourse-historical series from Tarde to Kracauer. See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denney: *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character*. Abridged ed. with a 1969 preface. (New Haven CT, London: Yale University Press, 1950), 8. For further discussion of this topic, see Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 492–4; and Bublitz, *In der Zerstreuung organisiert*, 52–64. Regarding the relation between crowds and television, see Christine Bartz, *MassenMedium Fernsehen: Die Semantik der Masse in der Medienbeschreibung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007).

both of these phenomena. Consequently, as Susanne Lüdemann has lamented, the crowd no longer seems to exist in its familiar form:

Bodies no longer have to *move* in order to participate in social and political affairs. [...] Images and sounds simply come to us in our homes. The 'new media' of today do not serve to liberate the masses but rather to bring about, with a sleight of hand, their ultimate disappearance.<sup>65</sup>

This diagnosis of loss, which has far-reaching political implications, warrants closer inspection and should encourage us to follow the media-sociological line of development, as outlined above, even further. This should be done even if it means that, for the moment, I will have to set aside the fruitful comparison between Kracauer's concept of the public and Tarde's micro-sociological scaling from individual to the crowd and from the crowd to the public sphere. On the media-historical threshold between Kracauer's and Bookchin's mass ornaments can be found Walter Benjamin's figure of the examiner. Distracted or absent-minded examiners, in whose hands Benjamin places the future of both the media system and the political system,<sup>66</sup> exercise their discerning expertise no longer as an immobile gathering in the anonymous darkness of the movie theater. In addition to possessing intuitive knowledge for making sensitive evaluations of medial performances, they now additionally possess productive and distributive capabilities.

To recall: In the case of the Tiller Girls, the crowd receives its ornament from the outside. Accordingly, the form of the mass ornament is as clearly defined as the allocation of roles in society. While the founding actor – just like the observing Kracauer – seems to be removed from the situation, the social ornament is in fact formed by the groups of dancers and spectators that are differentiated from one another by the spatial mechanism of the stage. In Bookchin's case, this functional divide has become just as fragile as the contours of the ornament. The gap between the stage and the spectator space has disappeared. Production, distribution, and reception have become non-exclusive and equally viable options of activity. The form of the ornament, moreover, is no longer determined by musical scores and stage directions; it is rather continuously created by the self-addressing acts of the user. The collectives of these dispersed and distracted examiners are connected less by a binding idea or representation than they are by mediatized acts of imitation. Such acts are hardly restricted to the performed movements of dancers; rather, they are characteristic of entire stages of web-based communication.<sup>67</sup> The mimetic repetitions

---

<sup>65</sup> Lüdemann, "Unsichtbare Massen," 89. Although Lüdemann is chiefly concerned here with tele-media such as the television, her argument is no less valid in the case of social networking media. In the end, the internet has further enhanced the mixture of the private and public spheres that Lüdemann is criticizing.

<sup>66</sup> See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 238–41.

<sup>67</sup> Hans Bernhard Schmid has pointed out that Tarde's ideas of social somnambulism and the *évolution par association* strike a practical balance between subject-based and memetic perspectives. In light of the renaissance of the meme concept as a self-descriptive category of web communication, this "middle way" warrants further investigation. Tarde seems to offer a particularly apt and timely

in front of the camera and on the screen, which are highlighted in Bookchin's montage, furnish the ornaments of mass customization with the recognition value of a likewise social and medial figure.

Tarde's evolutionary sociology of imitation and (not to be forgotten) faulty imitation thus offers a fitting conceptual instrument for understanding these processes of socio-medial self-control, the recursivity and iterability of which Bookchin has made so apparent. It cannot (and need not) be addressed here whether Tarde was right to believe that society is generated by imitation. The line of argumentation is rather the other way around: A social association by imitation serves as circumstantial evidence in a trial concerning the generalizability of the observed socio-medial processes, and Tarde has been called as a witness. In light of the precarious shape (*Gestalt*) of the social web ornament, his concept of the crowd seems less adequate in this regard than his concept of the public or public sphere. Not only can the latter concept compensate for the loss of externally founded social ornamentality; it can also shed light on its consequences for social and political participation.

#### V. *The Ornament of Mass Customization and its Political Potential*

By way of conclusion, I can now revisit the question concerning oppositional potential and the relationship between virtual mass ornaments and physically present crowds of protesters. Of concern here is thus the potential for mobilization that is inherent to the ornament of mass customization.<sup>68</sup> Whereas Kracauer stated that the "masses organized" in large dance troupes "come from offices and factories,"<sup>69</sup> today's media technology and the use of outsourcing make it unnecessary to extract people from such places. Or, to put it in more extreme terms, today's masses can simply stay at home.

For Gilles Deleuze, it is precisely this dissolution of internment that distinguishes societies of discipline from societies of control:

The factory constituted individuals as a single body to the double advantage of the boss who surveyed each element within the mass and the unions who mobilized a mass resistance; but the corporation constantly presents the brashest rivalry as a healthy form of emulation, an excellent motivational force that opposes individuals against one another and runs through each, dividing

---

vocabulary for describing the so-called viral communication that takes place on the Web 2.0. See Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Evolution durch Imitation: Gabriel Tarde und das Ende der Memetik," in *Soziologie der Nachahmung und des Begehrens: Materialien zu Gabriel Tarde*, ed. Christian Borch and Urs Stäheli (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 280–310.

<sup>68</sup> Kracauer himself referred quite openly to the mobilizing effects of classical (mostly cinematic) mass ornaments in the service of National-Socialist propaganda. Here I will have neglect this issue in order to remain focused on the present situation. See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

<sup>69</sup> Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," 79.

each within. [...] Individuals have become “dividuals,” and the masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.”<sup>70</sup>

Whereas one of such post-Fordistic forms of controls has already been imagined in terms of the digital enclosure,<sup>71</sup> the “question of resistance in times of dividual desire” remains open.<sup>72</sup> Open, too, is Deleuze’s question concerning the potential for mobilization through which the potential for resistance can be realized. Gerald Raunig has associated the potential for resistance with the development of “ethical and aesthetic ways of existing,” believing that these “will allow our mechanized forms of operating to function no longer (simply) by means of social and economic apparatuses. Rather, they will allow us use new technologies and forms of organization in a virtuoso manner.”<sup>73</sup> Paolo Virno has also stressed the importance of virtuosity to the constitution of such alternative forms of organization, though he has been quick to point out its ambivalent character.<sup>74</sup> As a variation of the Marxist idea of “general intellect,” virtuosity admittedly represents a generally accessible and *a priori* public element that precedes any form of socialization. However, as long as it is “evoked over and over again in its role as productive force,” it merely reproduces and internalized techniques of suppression. It is only when it has been retransferred into the public sphere of a political community that virtuosity can serve as a “possible root of political action, as a different constitutional principle,”<sup>75</sup> one that does not simply or inevitably strengthen the power relations that are already in place.

Teeming as it is with social monads, Tarde’s public sphere offers a fitting model for imagining the political public of the social web. Neither in philosophical nor sociological terms did Tarde consider social monads to be subject to binary distinctions. He rather regarded them – with a sort of quantitative logic – “as each individual’s reciprocal possession, in many varied forms, of every other.”<sup>76</sup> They are not faced with the choice between being (*Sein*) and not being respective being present (*Dabei-Sein*) and not being present; they rather aspire to participate as fully as possible and to affiliate themselves with other monads. This reciprocal permeation may encourage competition and hegemonic pretenses,

<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 139–42, at 140.

<sup>71</sup> A detailed analysis would have to take this metaphor seriously and describe the primitive accumulation of data as form of disciplinary enclosure. Accordingly, Deleuze’s historical separation of societies of discipline and societies of control would have to be interrogated in terms of its transitions and intersections.

<sup>72</sup> Gerald Raunig, “Dividuen des Facebook: Das neue Begehren nach Selbsterteilung,” in *Generation Facebook: Über das Leben im Social Net*, ed. Oliver Leistert and Theo Röhle (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 148–60, at 158. See also Carolin Wiedemann’s chapter in the present book.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>74</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti and James Cascaito (Cambridge, MA: Semiotexte, 2003), 61–70.

<sup>75</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti and James Cascaito (Cambridge, MA: Semiotexte, 2003), 67.

<sup>76</sup> *Tarde. Methoden der Soziologie*, 51.

but it also promotes social transformation and can ultimately be regarded as giving rise to “the marvels of civilization.”<sup>77</sup> Tarde’s plea for a philosophy of possession highlights “the underexposed side of social networking,” which, according to Raunig, is occupied by the desire “to communicate in public, share (or communicate) one’s information, and share (or divide) oneself.”<sup>78</sup> Tarde’s critical impulse is not to discover the identity of social individuals and groups but rather to comprehend the quantifiable intensity of common desire and common beliefs. As regards the situation of the Web 2.0, this means that its individuals can be statistically measured or registered more easily than ever before. This also means that such individuals are admittedly more susceptible than their predecessors to the normalizing forces of biopolitical controls. However, the permanent possibility that the public will change or shift in one way or another hinders its addressability and thus also hinders the possibility of manipulating the public in the service a given idea or representation.

The individuals of the social web may not form an obviously social body, as did the public masses in Kracauer’s time, but even the dispersed masses, as Virno has noted with respect to the post-Fordistic multitude, “need a form of unity, of being a One.”<sup>79</sup> Whereas Virno recognizes the unified milieu of these decentralized collectives in the Aristotelian *topoi koinoi*, Bookchin’s mass ornament suggests that this basic idea needs to be expanded. It is not only linguistic or logical commonalities, but also aesthetic and morphologic commonalities, that form the foundation for the centrifugal movement of collectivization from the one to the many and that, contrary to technological infrastructure, resist total privatization. The schemes of medial forms enable a transition from the (technological) connectivity of the network to the (social) collectivity of the swarm and consequently enable the tactical development of a “combination of collectivity and connectivity” for purposes of political mobilization.<sup>80</sup>

In no way have crowds been shattered or done away with; they are simply no longer formed exclusively in public venues such as the streets, movie theaters, or stadiums. However, they can nevertheless be mobilized as quickly and as unpredictably as before. This potentiality is actualized in an event-based manner when the threshold between on-line and offline crowds has been crossed, a phenomenon that can currently be observed in several places.<sup>81</sup> The moment of escalation may be attributed to the formation of a

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>78</sup> Raunig, “Dividuen des Facebook,” 156.

<sup>79</sup> Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 25.

<sup>80</sup> Eugene Thacker, “Networks, Swarms, Multitudes (Part One),” *CTheory.net* (May 18, 2004), <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=422> (accessed on September 8, 2014). For Thacker, networks produce connectivity that is formed in clusters, whereas swarms produce a sort of collectivity that has a specific purpose. He argues against rashly identifying one or the other according to technological or biological models for social organization and he locates the political impulse of the multitude in the oscillation between these two poles.

<sup>81</sup> The potential for mobilization exhibited by these medial groups depends above all on whether they are able to synchronize the social moments of isomorphically constituted fields. If the situational in-

collective consciousness (or swarm consciousness). This is preceded, however, by an implicit and internalized morphological knowledge that is possessed by dispersed and distracted examiners, as Bookchin's montages have demonstrated. In her mass ornaments, these heterogeneous crowds are made visible at a stage of functional latency, that is, before the exponential escalation of their social dynamic.<sup>82</sup> Lüdemann's complaint about the disappearance of crowds can now be relativized with reference to the invisible and large-scale processes of suggestion that take place in the public sphere of the social web. The media of the present day cause the older crowds to disappear only to the extent that they liberate new ones. It is precisely against the presumed invisibility of crowds, moreover, that Bookchin's audiovisual strategy is directed. Her *Mass Ornament* captures historical, social, and aesthetic constellations in a snapshot of interrelations that translates both its socio-cultural and aesthetic frameworks into the formal aesthetic arrangement of its surface. Out of forms of construction, forms of composition emerge that transform abstract structural homologies (between medial and social situations) into an aesthetic experience. Bookchin's split screen montages suggest that there must be close morphological ties among any number of similarly produced "mash ups." Although my discussion here has been limited to a single telling example, I hope to have provided at least partial insight into a broader panorama of morphological interrelations.<sup>83</sup> With any luck, further investigations will bring even more of this panorama to light.

---

terferences between medial forms and social forces are consolidated into temporarily stable relations, the latency of the socio-aesthetic constellation will manifest itself as a historical event. Regarding the idea that historical events are caused by overlapping and synchronized crises, of several social fields see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 173–79. On the significance of medially generated synchronicity to the self-consciousness of Tarde's public sphere, see Stäheli, "Der Takt der Börse," 258.

<sup>82</sup> Thus they correspond to the self-reinforcing chain reactions of web communication. On the latency and escalation of social swarms, see Eva Horn, "Schwärme – Kollektive ohne Zentrum: Einleitung," in *Schwärme, Kollektive ohne Grenzen: Eine Wissensgeschichte zwischen Leben und Information*, ed. Eva Horn and Lucas Marco Gisi (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 7–26.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of the potential and limitations of sociological panoramas, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Social-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174–90.