

Defining the concept of a crowd in European literature

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Abstract. Martha Kuhlman criticizes Milan Kundera for repeatedly depicting crowds in a negative light, contrasting his impressions with that of another novelist and observer of crowds. But how do we define the concept of a crowd? In this slightly light-hearted paper, I propose a definition and then note a problem with it and then propose another definition.

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“Crowded in the arch of a canal we saw

The absence of a blanket for ever more.”

In a rewarding article for *The Comparatist*, Martha Kuhnman – sorry Kuhlman – draws attention to how Milan Kundera repeatedly presents negative images of crowds. She is not convinced that crowds are by nature something negative, however. She contrasts Kundera’s impressions of crowds with that of another novelist and observer:

...Canetti’s perception of crowds is decidedly more favorable than Kundera’s, as is evident from his account of the May Day parade. These two opposite visions of May Day serve to underline the fact that the crowd is ultimately an empty construct with no intrinsic meaning outside of the specific context from which it arises. (2001: 103)

But there is a prior question of how to define the concept of a crowd in the European literature that she focuses on. Do the two European novelists and essayists even rely on the same concept

of a crowd, such that both would agree on “That’s a crowd” statements even if they disagree over what crowds are like – same concept, different conceptions? (Does *The Comparatist* make comparisons on such matters, and if not who does?!)

From Kuhlman’s article, it is natural to start with the following definition.

Something is a crowd if and only if:

- (i) It is composed of a large number of individuals.
- (ii) They are in a relatively small physical space, such that this number can only be there by the individuals being close together.

But how large is the number? And is there some restriction concerning what counts as an individual when applying the definition, so that there can be a crowd of human beings but not a crowd of wasps?

However we elaborate these questions, there is a problem, at least if we turn to the English translation I have of Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The opening of part four, entitled “Lost Letters,” tells us:

I calculate that two or three new fictional characters are bapitized here on earth every second. That is why I am always hesitant to join that vast crowd of John the Bapartists. But what can I do? After all, my characters need to have names. (1996: 109)

The problem for the definition above is that the crowd in this case are not all together in some relatively small physical space (or so we reasonably assume). Kundera later proposes conditions under which a mania for writing achieves epidemic proportions in a society, with many people becoming writers (1996: 127). He thereby suggests that a crowd can exist either by meeting (i) and (ii) above, suitably elaborated, or else if the following conditions obtain:

- (iii) A large number of individuals are engaged in a certain activity.
- (iv) There are conditions which cause such a large number to be engaged in it.
- (v) These conditions need not obtain in any society or any period of human history.

In this case, one may speak of a crowd of people engaged in the activity, even if the activity is not pursued with all the individuals together in a relatively small physical space.

References

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Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.