Taking it to the street: an examination of the flash mob phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

In little less than a decade, 'flash mob' has become an internationally recognised phrase. What began in 2003 as a short-lived collection of personal experiments (Wasik, 2010), quickly flourished. Flash mobs include a wide spectrum of public performances that share some bizarre features. As events, they begin without warning and end as abruptly; the rationale for their fleeting existence is seemingly unexplainable, confounding accepted performer and audience roles. This thesis constructs a timeline of preceding performative practices linked to elements of the flash mob. These practices are as diverse as Ancient Greek theatrical spectacle, the Surrealist manifesto, and Happenings of the 1960s, which protested against an alternative spectacle, the spectacle of capitalist society. Applying viewing practices that first arose in the nineteenth century's early modern consumerist era illuminates features of the contemporary flash mob. The identity of flash mob participants is analysed through employing object-relation theories of material culture. Mobile communicative devices are integral technological tools that feature prominently in examining the process of the flash mob (Rheingold, 2000, 2003; Lanier, 2011). These communication tools, particularly with the advent of Internet based social media websites, provide opportunities to control the production process within a global context. This possibility is explored utilising the Frankfurt School's debates surrounding the ability to meaningfully democratise a pervasive economic system. It is a parallel phenomenon of which advertisers and political activists alike have taken advantage. Exploiting the potential of the flash mob for such purposes has resulted in notable transformations. Though above all else, central to each expression of the flash mob, is the principle of the unexpected. Inexplicable surprise or punctum (Barthes, 2000) is presented herein as common purpose of these professed 'pointless acts' (OED, 2008). While flash mobs continually aspire to confuse, this thesis arrives at underlying motivations centred upon the consistently applicable feature of surprise prevalent in theoretical case studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

share in conversation. This thesis will demonstrate that the significance of the flash mob goes much deeper.

Approval from the Massey University Ethics Committee was obtained prior to commencing and documenting the field research undertaken in this investigation.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

A woman in a grey pant suit claps and stamps her feet one metre away as you finish the last bite of your sandwich. Glancing over from your perch on the grass verge in front of the library, you notice that a teenager with a skateboard under his arm at the top of the square's steps follows suit. Three small children and their mother also appear to know this routine, and you find yourself spinning about in bewilderment as the middle-aged gentleman to your left, with his umbrella now on the ground, spins and turns as well – but he, unlike yourself, is turning in time with the others. Over the next thirty seconds music plays loudly from an unknown source and dozens of others move, clap, stamp and shake to the beat of a 90s pop medley. The full-blown spontaneous cast of this bizarre performance soon strikes a pose in time with the final chord of the mysterious music, creating a surprising tableau against the shop windows that surround the town square. Just as abruptly as it began, the amateur dancers disperse among the crowd that has gathered. They reclaim their umbrellas, check their mobile phones and exit the space casually in every which direction, as if nothing of consequence has taken place. In the afternoon shadow of the cathedral spire, the ebb and flow across the paving stones returns to normal as the bemused onlookers more slowly disperse. They wander off slowly, debriefing amongst themselves and examining the photographs and videos they have captured.

The act that these individuals have united to perform has been termed a 'flash mob'. Flash mobs are occurrences that embody many contradictions. They possess a sense of nostalgia, harking back to a time in which large and joyous community gatherings were more common, while simultaneously reflecting the technological progressions and increased reliance on electronic communications devices evident in contemporary society. Flash mobs involve the coming together, if however brief, of the urban population. The fractured and individual nature of the city is partially and temporarily connected. The participants are at once consumers and producers within a global setting.

This thesis will examine the trajectory of the flash mob, from its emergence through current practices and conclude with assertions regarding this phenomenon's future. This analysis will involve an examination of the set of circumstances, tools and intentions that enable and encourage flash mob events. In examining the different aspects of this phenomenon, flash mobs will be treated as a living, changing practice

that transforms over time. The varied expressions of each case study in this thesis demonstrate the importance of considering the uniqueness of each individual event. Common features that place different events within the flash mob definition will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

'Refine … the debate' (Geertz, 1973, p. 29)[1]

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[1] Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) developed 'thick description', a theory aimed at bringing a deeper level of interpretation to social science practices. A 'thick description' involves a detailed endeavour to explore the semiotic or symbolic nature of cultural phenomena. The aim, as Geertz describes it, is not to achieve a 'perfection of the consensus' but instead to 'refine … the debate' (p. 29) surrounding the particularities of events and customs in society.

TOWARD A DEFINITION

'Flash mob' has now been included in the most ubiquitous reference books for the English language. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (2008) defines the flash mob as 'a public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again'. An article from the Social Issues Research Centre (Taylor, 2003) similarly describes a flash mob as 'a large group of people who gather in a predetermined location, perform some brief action, and then quickly disperse'. Sean Savage, widely accepted as the originator of the term 'flash mob' (McFedries, 2003; Nicholson, 2004) stipulates that the group is 'leaderless' and organised using mobile communication technologies (McFedries, 2003). Flash mobs simultaneously epitomise the communications practices of contemporary society and intentionally avoid the active dissemination of any particular message, political or otherwise. Statements and discussions on websites and online forums, the virtual spaces in which flash mobs are planned, relived and commented upon, support the key features of the above definitions. Flash mobs are sudden, brief, quickly dispersed public performances organised via mobile phones and the Internet (Gillin, 2003; Sieber, 2010, Adelaide Flash Mob, 2011; Urban Dictionary, 2012). The succinct and accessible definition from the OED (2008) is in concurrence with academic scholarship and popular media, and will serve as a brief definitive reference statement throughout this analysis.

To understand the nature of the flash mob in greater detail, *A Flashmob Manifesto* (Aglomerarispontane, 2004, see Appendix 1) explains various elements and nuances in depth. Vehemently professed comments on YouTube videos or online forums of events that apparently do not adhere to the conventions of flash mobbing are largely synonymous with detailed guidelines as outlined by this manifesto. This source has been published voluntarily by an individual on an open website. Debate regarding the exact nature of flash mobs does not exist definitively or in any depth in formal writings. There are scholarly articles that discuss the nature of flash mobs (Taylor, 2003), but the definition of the practice is often assumed (McDonald, 2011) or left to be inferred through the description of exemplars of the phenomenon (Kaufman, 2009; Nicholson, 2005). Otherwise definitions and descriptions come from dictionaries such the OED (Molar, 2010) or websites (McFedries, 2003), blogs (Aglomerarispontane, 2004; Savage, 2003) and forums that look to explore neologisms and their related

phenomena. The reason for the use of the more alterable and at times unverifiable websites as sources can be traced to the recent emergence of this phenomenon. Information accessed via such sites will be noted when cited throughout this thesis. The *Manifesto*'s clauses will be referred to when comment on specific aspects of flash mobs is required. *A Flashmob Manifesto*'s (Aglomerarispontane, 2004) first and therefore principal proclamation, is that a flash mob does not have a purpose. This is in agreement with OED's (2008) definition that uses the phrase 'pointless act'.

As a result, one could object to the use of 'taking it to the street' (a colloquial metaphor for telling everyone your problems) in the title of this analysis. While flash mobs do occur in streets, squares, public transport stations, shopping centres and other such public thoroughfares, the cited flash mob definitions create doubt as to the relevance of a phrase that means to air one's problems. If flash mobs are intentionally devoid of purpose, what, if anything, are flash mobsters 'taking to the street'? This thesis looks to address the reason behind these events that are ostensibly intended to be without purpose - if not their conscious intent then certainly the underlying causes and impacts.

The use of the phrase 'taking it to the street' also refers to the, at times, discontented murmurs and at others notable furore that flash mob events have caused. People have often assumed that these events must be motivated by a particular agenda (Creagh, 2004) and this assumption has been given ammunition by the appropriation of the flash mob movement for the memorialisation of pop legends, climate change protests and telecommunications advertisements. These progressions or transgressions will be discussed in the final chapter. Comparisons to the apolitical flash mob will be undertaken in this section of analysis.

If flash mob occurrences are determinedly pointless, mapping a trajectory of their driving forces could prove to be rather elusive. However, clause two of *A Flashmob Manifesto*, 'although it may express an opinion or statement', does provide an opening for discussion. What unspoken statements are flash mob participants expressing? What comments, intentionally or unintentionally, are they making? Why have they emerged? What element/s of contemporary society do they particularly speak to?

To begin to address the numerous questions that arise in relation to the flash mob, it is necessary to acknowledge the various expressions of the practice that have emerged to create a recognisable phenomenon, as well as the accompanying written commentaries on these events. The beginning of the flash mob is somewhat contested

but the consensus is that the phenomenon began in Manhattan's Macy's in 2003 (Nicholson, 2005), with a crowd temporarily converging on an expensive rug. Early prearranged and relatively brief gatherings were at first conducted to carry out very simple goals or to act quite one-dimensional roles such as this; freezing, or behaving as a particular animal are alternative examples (White, 2006). A five minute freeze flash mob took place in New York City's Grand Central Station on the 31st of January 2008. This event has subsequently become one of the most viewed flash mob events on YouTube (approaching 27,000,000 views by July 2011).

The creation of complex dance and musical routines has become a very popular form of flash mob practices. Through contacts made via the Internet and word of mouth, groups of people plan online and on occasion practise in person prior to the event. They congregate in an area to perform the set routine on cue, aiming to give the impression of separate unrelated groups and individuals that suddenly burst into song and dance. As the music plays, group-by-group the performance develops into a full-blown dancing and often singing extravaganza. The spontaneous audience created from onlookers and passersby often find themselves joining in or filming the event. Flash mobs have found their way into screen media formats. They have been featured in the situation-comedy *Modern Family* (Zuker, 2010) and have been epitomised in the production of a very successful advertising campaign by a mobile phone company in the UK (Molnar, 2009).

Flash mobs can be closely related to the light entertainment and pleasurable visual spectacle of early Hollywood musical performances, with their spontaneous singing, surrounded by a large cast of extras performing a carefully choreographed dance routine. Flash mobs merge this on-screen media with the 'real world' – bringing the musical to life. In a sense this is popular culture appropriating the early musical formats, resulting in a transformed contemporary expression. *Glee* is a recent musical comedy drama that exemplifies this process.[2]

However, whether a simple freeze or an elaborate dance performance, these events also have certain commonalities that bind them. Flash mobs by design take unsuspecting members of the public by surprise. Upon finishing, the participants casually disperse as if nothing has taken place. It is a brief and surreal dislocation from normal reality. They occur in urban areas with large populations from which to draw participants and areas with significant foot traffic in order to engage passersby. The

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[2] *Glee* is a musical comedy-drama from Fox Studios, created, written and directed by Ryan Murphy, Brad Fulchuk and Ian Brennan (Glee, 2012). The series began in 2009 and is currently in its third season.

informal meeting areas of the city are frequent settings for these events. The clock in Grand Central Station is an excellent example of this type of coordination point for urban populations. These locations are essential components of a city's life (Schelling, 1960 as cited in Rheingold[3], 2003) and are therefore an understandable choice for the visual expression of a more elaborate yet still informal coordination of the city's population.

Flash mobs contest the 'tragedy of the commons' theory.[4] During participation in a flash mob event, individuals must carefully and respectfully negotiate themselves within a constricted communal space. It is not in the individual's best interests to disregard others and their stake in the event. Flash mobs celebrate the possibility of harmoniously utilising public environs while simultaneously interrupting the well practised everyday communal usage of the same space. The contradictory nature of the flash mob is again highlighted.

Flash mob practices possess an integral element of anonymity. This resides within the midst of a temporary group or community with a common task that must work in very close cooperation; it creates an oxymoronic tension to be explored. It is necessary for this study to explain how, in such bustling, disconnected and diverse cities across the globe, complete strangers can coordinate with such apparent ease to achieve events that demand the actions of a very cohesive collective. Firstly, the rise of the flash mob has been heavily supported by the increasingly ubiquitous and integrated presence of the Internet in society. Due to the Internet, time-based video documentations of events have been posted on extremely popular self-generated media share sites, particularly YouTube. The global dissemination of these events largely occurs via online platforms accompanied by verbal recounts and the sharing of on-site documentations with others directly from the recording device. Previous academic writings, such as Nicholson (2005), have alluded to the dissemination of these performances as testimony to the global village that the Internet fosters - particularly in countries classified as developed or belonging to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) that have more easy access to online modes of technological communication. Flash mobs have also been

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[3] Howard Rheingold is a renowned scholar in the analysis of communication technologies. *The Virtual Community*, first published in 1993, was the first of many acclaimed publications tackling this topic as new developments arose.

[4] *Commons* is an old English term that refers to a community's shared pastureland for grazing animals. 'Tragedy of the Commons' is the theory that individuals are compelled to exceed their share of the land for their own benefit, disregarding the fact that the pasture is a finite resource and can be permanently depleted if not cared for properly (Hardin, 1968).

discussed as examples of the reclamation of production means - the consumer turned producer (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). This assertion intimates that flash mobs make possible the manipulation and even the reversal of capitalist processes, often purported as almost immovable (du Gay et al, 1997; Evans & Hall, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

In order to construct a clear conception of the motivations behind flash mobs, faced with definitions that proclaim no purpose, various avenues will be explored. The fields of visual culture and material culture, sociology, social geography, psychology and art history will be employed to this end. This analysis will provide discussion on the contemporary spectacle, the use of technology and the commercial appropriation of social trends. Historical perspectives on the viewership of the urban individual are applied to the flash mob and theories of identity involving the role of place are investigated.

Visual culture is a field of study that explores the 'the social construction of the visual' (Tavin, 2003, p. 207) within particular socio-cultural contexts. This area of focus has also been described as examining visuality. The cultural significance of the visual holds priority of focus (Schwarz & Przyblyski, 2004). Tavin's (2003) definition will be used as a reference point in analysing flash mobs. Scholars' theories and writings that span between the original visual culturalists, including Benjamin and more contemporary successors such as Gunning, Evans and Hall provide guidance in approaching the exploration of the flash mob phenomenon.

Visual cultural theory initially brought together the preoccupation of art history with the visual and anthropology's attention to cultural practices (Evans & Hall, 2004). It continues to spread to incorporate features of many other disciplines such as geography and sociology. On both ends of the spectrum, broad all-encompassing social theories and traditional segregated disciplines came to be seen as incapable of dealing with the visual culture problematic (Mirzoeff, 1998). The study of visual culture arose from a need to explore the distinct particularities of the visual by meeting somewhere in the middle. The process of looking has become a central binding focus in a complex and varied endeavour to use the visual to unravel cultural practices.

Fundamental to the field of visual culture are the use of varied and combined methodologies and the embracing of subjective realities. There is no one model or neat explanation presented to summarise the visual culture phenomenon and at many junctures perhaps more questions than answers will be posed. This study is divided into sub-sections that will engage with the various influences that have been drawn upon and amalgamated over a diverse and lengthy historical trajectory. Observations and trends regarding the flash mob will be analysed scrutinise through the different

academic lenses that provide frameworks for analysis when considering the various and diverse elements of the flash mob. The manners in which flash mobs engage looking, both in their time-bound performance lives and their extended lifespan via online audiences, will be major focal points within this analysis.

Gunning's *From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and Traffic in Souls (1913)* (1997) is an analysis of literature portraying surfacing trends in the nature of the viewer during the nineteenth century and will be used to guide the first chapter of analysis. The existence of three distinct visual consumption identities is asserted, heavily mediated by the urban environment. Gunning explains these three distinctive modes, extrapolated from Poe's *The Man of The Crowd* (1992). Direct comparisons will be made to the modes of viewing involved in the flash mob.

In addition to a largely overarching approach that addresses the processes involved in looking, the real-time production of the flash mob and the documented evidence of these events in the form of photographs, videos or online forum posts will also be evaluated with the assistance of material culture methodologies.

Woodward sees material culture as a term that inherently highlights 'how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity' (2007, p. 4). This exemplifies the interdependent relationship between people and things as the core focus. It is important to note that within contemporary circles of scholarship in material culture, the concept of 'things' has been broadened to also include people, spaces and less tangible items such as those that exist within the screen-based worlds of television and the Internet, now such pervasive features of contemporary society. Flash mobs can be included within this more expansive definition of 'things'.

The marrying of the visual and material culture approaches is a natural and inevitable partnership. However particular sub-sections will lend themselves more readily to referencing scholars from one or the other approach. When considering the impact flash mobs have on identity, analysis will address those links that exist between people and things to establish an understanding of oneself, a key assertion of material culture. The discussion of the influence of technology will draw on many writings that can more aptly be described as exemplifying visual cultural perspectives.

Together with the consideration of visual cultural and material cultural theories and the application of some of their key theorists' work, social research practices will

be employed. Flash mob events are analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively in this study. Qualitative analysis will be carried out, evaluating the planning, locations, participants and props of flash mob YouTube favourites. Quantitative analysis will be utilised less widely but will play a significant role in measuring the expanding viewership of various flash mob events. This will be done by accessing, documenting and comparing the video statistics available from YouTube.

The joining of these two major categories of data, largely qualitative but also in part quantitative, is a necessary part of the analysis embedded in 'thick description'. This ethnographic approach to research developed in the 1970s remains applicable into the twenty-first century. Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' involves reflexivity, gathered information (raw research material) and theory. When applicable, each component of 'thick description' will be utilised to move beyond surface description and focus on the 'circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies [and] motivations that characterise a particular episode' (Shwandt, 2001, p. 5). A detailed process of interpretation is essentially what defines a description as 'thick' (Geertz, 1973). This interpretation must be firmly situated within the social context where the subject is placed or occurs. Denzin (1989) qualifies a true thick description as including biographical, historical, situational, relational and interactional qualities. The qualitative components of this research, especially in the communication of research findings regarding particular case studies, will consciously employ these principles of thick description. Examples of flash mobs and their accumulative components are described in detail, situating them within the particular context of their physical locale and their website existence, as well as the broader social reaction to and understanding of the event. This close analysis of flash mob case studies in particular is undertaken to create the verisimilitude necessary to establish as direct an understanding of the event for the reader as possible.

Interviews and comments on public forums will be used to develop profiles of individual perspectives on the experience of a flash mob. Interviews will include conversations with people involved in the different roles in these performances: organiser, participant, online viewer. The monitoring and examination of pre-existing online forums in which producers, participants, live audience and online viewers comment and interact will be of particular focus. These latter are an invaluable source of documented, independently occurring public conversation regarding flash mobs. Beyond the detailed description of flash mobs, these online comments will also provide insight into the public responses to particular events. Close analysis of post-event

comments will serve as an important source of data in constructing the intention and meaning of flash mobs. They will assist to explore the underlying impetus of flash mobs, as these are comments that individuals choose to spontaneously contribute to the broader public conversations surrounding these events. The majority of these comments were sourced from public, non-membership based forums. Interviews with participants and organisers will support this interpretation into the reactions and motivation surrounding flash mobs.

My own attendance, as well as my involvement in the prior dialogue and post-event documentation and responses of flash mob events will also be detailed herein. This personal experience will be a notable focus of the final chapter regarding the current adaptations of flash mob events. Using a combination of personal ethnographic experience and the perspectives of organisers and participants, together with online comments and documentation of various flash mob events, a thorough analysis from multiple sources and perspectives is undertaken in a thesis of four chapters.

The final objective is not to provide the reader with a comprehensive predictive timeline of the flash mob but with an understanding and appreciation (as Geertz (1973) suggests) of the development of flash mob practices and the ability to assess the impact of this phenomenon both retrospectively and prospectively by considering past expressions and future possibilities.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter One, *The Precedents,* will explore some societal developments and influential social movements that have contributed to the advent of the flash mob. This chapter begins with the emergent visual practices of the nineteenth century, utilising Poe's assertions of three distinct viewing personas to explicate these trends. This provides an historical platform to later apply directly to the flash mob. This historical context then moves forward chronologically to consider the impact of twentieth-century social and art movements including Surrealism and performance art. A section outlining the trajectory of globalisation and its pervasive influence on contemporary society, particularly regarding communications, concludes an historical contextualisation of the flash mob.

The second component of Chapter One is a review of varied literatures that provide the theoretical basis for this analysis of the flash mob. Firstly, previous examples and commentaries on the flash mob phenomenon are considered. Academic articles and theses, as well as popular media sources such as newspapers, magazines and online forums are cited. Subsequently, canonical academic texts examining consumerism, and those that have established the academic disciplines of visual and material culture are outlined. The materialism of urban consumer culture that originated in the mid-nineteenth century saw the birth of new urban figures. Poe's writings on the personas provide the basis for the combined presentation of theoretical perspectives on consumerism and visual culture. Material culture is presented utilising more recent scholarship that has defined this field that is centred upon the relationship between people and their physical environment. Barthes' theory of punctum, a concept that provides an important point of reference in understanding the significance of the flash mob, closes the chapter.

Chapter Two, *The Nature,* begins with an account of the flash mob as spectacle. The application of the nineteenth century modes of viewing as related in Chapter One follows. The character of the flash mob is then illuminated with the material cultural perspectives on identity. It is shown how Concepts such as object-relations theory and the significance of place work to develop an understanding of flash mob involvement and participant attributes and motivations.

Chapter Three, *The Means,* addresses the circumstances that have facilitated the advent and propagation of the flash mob. The role of technology in the 'success' of

flash mob events is a predominant focus. Analysis will involve assessing the way flash mobs are in large part organised and re-lived throughout the world via computer screens and their far-reaching communication capabilities. Chapter Three will also examine whether flash mobs are an exercising of the contemporary individual's ability to control the means of production due to technological advancements and accessibility. Examining the agency of individuals in the use of these resources will comprise the second section of this chapter. The final section of Chapter Three examines the significance of memory to the flash mob and the means by which these memories are constructed.

Chapter Four, *Transformation,* discusses the appropriation and transformation of flash mobs. Transformations of the flash mob are considered to be flash mobs that exhibit notable digressions from the key features of this thesis' working definition. The concept of the flash mob has already been famously used for advertising campaigns and for the promotion of television programs. Its conventions have also been utilised for numerous protests and memorialisation events. This chapter also considers the future of the flash mob and presents possible directions and characteristics that may develop as time progresses. Is it the definition that must change with the practice or is it quickly becoming much more rare to encounter a 'true' flash mob event? The transition from the apolitical to the hyper-political is a key development in the flash mob phenomenon that challenges the definition of the term. This chapter also explores whether to maintain the integrity of the term, it is necessary for flash mobs to exhibit such elements as an apparent lack of purpose or the creation of a spontaneous audience, and not comprised of friends and family of participants with cameras at the ready. This final body chapter provides a response to the increasingly often-proclaimed premature death of the flash mob.

This analysis concludes with a final discussion principally based on the crucial element of surprise. Barthes' concept of punctum, the puncturing of the everyday, provides a clear theoretical basis to bring together key expressions of the dynamic and diffusive flash mob phenomenon.

Chapter One:
THE PRECEDENTS

'Flash mobs … can bring in **… people** looking for a new kind of activism integrating pop culture and social media' (End The Occupation, 2011)

While flash mobs are accepted as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon that has arisen within the last decade, historical precedents do exist. Many paths have intertwined and transformed to arrive at the recent appearance of the flash mob. It is useful to explore some precedents in order to position an historical trajectory that establishes an understanding of practices that foreshadowed the advent of this phenomenon.

Writings that specifically address the flash mob are detailed, essential in establishing a clear understanding of this phenomenon. This chapter also outlines the academic literature pertinent to constructing the theory component of a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973).

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS IN VIEWERSHIP

The notion of the contemporary urban figure can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. Poe's (1992) pursuit of the stranger takes place after dark in Parisian streets and testifies to a new realm of the urban. The description of three personas is used to categorise emerging nineteenth-century societal practices surrounding looking. These urban figures are distinguished by their distinct modes of viewing in disregard of personal or vocational characterisations. There is the flâneur, distinguished by 'detached observation', the badaud or gawker's 'search for sensation' and the detective involved in 'shadowy pursuit' (Gunning, 1997, p. 26). They can be placed on a continuum; the gawker is passive in the extreme, the detective actively deciphers and the flâneur sits on a relatively impartial and removed middle ground.[5]

The urban environment produces invested and detached viewing antitheses. The distant observer persists but is less stable in the face of the busy and intriguing urban environment. Poe first outlines that the city can be a surface for viewers to skim. A persistent sense of disconnection exists in this compartmentalised environment that supports anonymity. However, the metropolis of Paris also possesses significant depths and wonders to delve into and explore.

The physical appearance of Poe's (1992) stranger does not align with the narrator's accepted vocational identities. This is highly intriguing to the narrator and therefore, it can be assumed, an anomaly in his experience. The narrator becomes a detective who, according to Gunning, masters observation by looking beyond the surface. Appearances are not explanation enough, as the relationship between the signifier and the signified is realised as unclear. Features of the city's architecture, spaces and populations are often facades that confound expectations, enforcing the need to explore beyond the surface.

Gunning emphasises unpredictability in the movements and actions of the urban individual. These unexpected qualities are evident in Poe's stranger and elicit an anxiety and urge to investigate in the flâneur-like narrator – far beyond the mild interest of his previous self-entertaining observation. Individual identity and personal agency are presented as considerably restricted and the erratic behaviour is asserted as

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[5] The tropes of modern Paris, such as the flâneur, were initially characterised by Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* first published in 1863 (Baudelaire. C, 2010).

largely driven by the urban surrounds. However, Poe's urban figures are attributed with variant levels of individuality. The flâneur, akin to Poe's narrator, retains some personal identity and self-awareness whereas the gawker's has disappeared; absorbed by the visual spectacle that has caught his attention.

Gunning asserts that Poe's intention was to present the detached flâneur as being overridden by the more powerful draw of visual fascination. The flâneur's method of leisurely perusing became more and more difficult in this accelerating urban world. Gunning declares the modern era as 'the day of the detective' (1997, p.102), a period embedded in searching for truth. This corresponds with modernist thinking that privileges definitive answers. Simultaneously, visual spectacles of glamorous department stores and urban architecture did inspire wonder, creating the awestruck gawker. Beneath these spectacles are also reasons, methods and more complex stories to be uncovered by the detective. While disparate, these two collective visual consumption identities exhibit an increasingly immersive modern visual culture. The three modes of visual consumption work concurrently but there is a concerted drive beyond the removed flâneur. There is a general shift beyond spectatorship into the realm of active participation, motivated by the compelling visuality of the urban environment.

Individual identity is easily overcome and lost due to the fast paced visual bombardment of the modern city. One can be thrust into an alternative form of the visual consumption trichotomy by any number of stimuli within the modern city. The flash mob, a recent addition to the urban landscape, is no exception. There are striking similarities in the personas of the three distinct viewers that Poe describes and the roles of the participants and audience of a flash mob. These modes of looking will be defined in greater detail in Chapter Two through the application of the practices of looking that exist within the contemporary flash mob.

SURREALISM

Dada[6], originally an intellectual and later an arts movement championed in Europe among others by Tristan, Zara, Itaas, Arp, and Richter, and by Marcel Duchamp in New York, involved a reflexive practice that flamboyantly flouted formal and traditional art conventions (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Partially born out of Dadaism was Surrealism, a very influential movement in the shaping of twentieth-century society. The origins of Surrealism are found in Andre Breton's[7] *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 (Crouch, 1999). Applying Freudian[8] theory to the creative process, Breton defined the Surreal as 'psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought … absen[t] of any control recognised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern' (Lippard, 1970 as cited in Crouch, 1999).

Liberating individual essence became a celebrated aim; this involved the uncovering of the unconscious self. Drawing from Freud, Breton recognised that faith placed in logic had become pervasive. This concept, reliant on scientific ideals, was a ubiquitous feature of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century societies. Such concrete and evidence-based observation of the world saw the loss of individual essence in understanding one's own identity and ego (Crouch, 1999). The exploration of identity through delving into the depths of the individual, reinvigorated by Freud and subsequent Surrealist literature, subsequently became a pervasive mantra in the Western concept of identity.[9]

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[6] Dadaists were 'concerned with the autonomy of the individual' (Crouch, 1999, p. 82). They sought to shatter the conventions of visual language of the era.

[7] Andre Breton is considered one of the key founders of Surrealism. Breton's literary texts worked to provide a platform for the ensuing Surrealist art and broader social movement. Breton, through contacts with key theorists, political figures and practitioners of the time was central in establishing a widely recognisable and enormously important avant-garde movement (Wollen, 1993).

[8] Sigmund Freud, the founding father of Psychoanalysis within the field of psychology, had a very significant influence on Breton's theories (Wollen, 1993). Freud's musings on the depths of an individual's unconscious and its crucial relationship to their conscious, lived experience opened a new realm of possibility for Breton. Surrealism was to explore this realm.

[9] The reflexive consideration of self at an individual level is a Euro-centric notion (Tsekeris, 2010). An alternative perspective can be found in non-Western, such as Pacific traditions, where the definition of self is firmly embedded within the collective identity of the group (Thaman, 2003). Dichotomous elements exist

The content of dreams, a major outlet for the expression of the unconscious mind within Freudian theory, was seen by Surrealists as a resource to access, harness and utilise. The experience of a flash mob could be said to possess dreamlike qualities as the sights and sounds of the event appear not to fit within the reality of the everyday. In psychoanalytic terms, it is noted that sharing thoughts arising from dreams results in the creation of a collective rather than individual essence (Crouch, 1999).

Breton searched for ways to escape the persistent emphasis on the logical, linear progression of his day. Flash mobs are a contemporary practice that perhaps represents this divergence from dominant societal notions but interestingly diverges from a notion that Breton supported. The importance of the individual, championed by Freud and Surrealism and omnipresent in Western society today, is challenged by the flash mob's celebration of the collective (Benson, 2002).

However, flash mobs are not in themselves revolutionary. Large congregations of people are often assumed as being linked to a political cause or deliberate and explicit statement. Therefore, many flash mob events have been wrongly assumed to be protests or demonstrations (Improv Everywhere, 2008, S. Wikaira, October 15, 2011). Despite these assumptions flash mobs, at least by definition and according to many organisers (Improv Everywhere, 2012; Adelaide Flash mob, 2011), share the absence of direct and oppositional political agendas that the majority of Surrealists exhibited.

While the glossary of Sturken and Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* (2001) confines Surrealism to a movement within the arts, Breton believed Surrealism held much broader application. He believed it was the 'basis for cultural revolution' (Crouch, 1999, p. 88). The Surrealists were fascinated with urban phenomena (Buck-Morss, 1991) and their responses to this environment were unconventional. Walter Benjamin's essay on Surrealism, published in 1929, is openly enthused by groundbreaking concepts surrounding freedom and the tendency to profanely illuminate materialism (Buck-Morss, 1991). Surrealists exposed the materialistic nature of urban society through creating overt parodies of the material products in their society. Subsequent cultural movements have responded to the urbanite. Flash mobs are likewise an urban phenomenon and require a fast-paced and populous urban landscape to be successful. Flash mobs take advantage of communication technologies' extensive network, these

within the flash mob; the phenomenon arose in cities in the West but also resembles aspects of Eastern (or non-Western) perspectives.

devices being the quintessential consumer products of our time. An unabashed level of exploitation of these media is evident.

Flash mobs also retain the whimsical wonder and detachment of the early European Surrealist painters. In place of honouring the traditional and conventional, the trivial is honoured in its stead (Buck-Morss, 1991). Flash mobs mirror this reverence towards the absurd. *A Flashmob Manifesto* (Aglomerarispontane, 2004) imparts a rituality and seriousness to a rather senseless and ridiculous practice. Flash mob events generally require significant forethought and preparation, prior to and on the prescribed day to ensure the event is successfully executed.

'Benjamin … criticises the nihilistic anarchism of Surrealism' (Buck-Morss, 1991). Burger believed this avant-garde[10] movement to be a radical departure from the previous bourgeois aesthetic (Buck-Morss, 1991). Flash mobs could be deemed a contemporary expression of this tendency, provided the avant-garde is not deemed to have become extinct following the development of post-modern ideals.

There are differing opinions among academia as to the continued existence of an avant-garde. Zurbrugg (2004) believes assertions by Jameson and other scholars of the Frankfurt School that the avant-garde died in the post-war era to be stubbornly pessimistic. Jameson, Adorno and their colleagues contended that the 1950s rise of television and mass commodification resulted in the complete extinction of the true avant-garde. Zurbrugg cites John Cage[11] from an interview with Stephen Montague in 1985 to support his alternative perspective. Cage argues that the avant-garde is simply flexibility of the mind and will forever remain (Montague, 1985). Zurbrugg (2004) summarises his interviews and suggests that postmodern multi-media practitioners deconstruct and reconstruct communication mediums, through the manipulation of technologies, in a manner that clearly embodies the avant-garde. However, Zurbrugg does point out that the innovations of the postmodern era are done without the 'utopian aesthetic aspirations' (2004, p. xii) of the modern era in which the Surrealists resided. Flash mobs, it seems, wish to retain aspects of the idealistic goals of Surrealist fantastical perfection in the creation of their grand-scale choreographies backlit by striking and renowned urban architectural features.

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[10] Avant-garde, which can directly be translated from French as vanguard or front-runner, is a term that describes 'the pioneers or innovators of a particular period or movement, often in opposition to the mainstream' (Noble & Bestley, 2004, p. 186).

[11] John Cage was a renowned composer/musician, multi-media practitioner and scholar of the post-war avant-garde (Zurbrugg, 2004).

Certain government actions further reinforce a concurrence between the rebellious aspect of Surrealism and flash mobs (Burkeman, 2009). They have been labelled as anti-social practices in some government publications and banned in many local jurisdictions in some of the world's most cosmopolitan cities (Traub, 2010). Do flash mobs really possess these rebellious objectives and severely clash with societal expectations?

PERFORMANCE ART

The 1950s saw the beginnings of the dangerous rebel being captured by the mass media in the Beatnik (Carr, 1993). Beatniks, the 'poster children' of the Beat movement, were the first bohemian group born into an age saturated my mass media. In this instance it was the newly televisual post-war era. However Carr (1993) asserts that making those individuals that dressed in beatnik fashion with beards and sandals synonymous with the Beat movement served to dilute the message of protest and rebellion for which the Beat movement stood. Though it did force a shift of the notion of a rebellious voice from within the art world, as with Surrealism, into mass culture (Carr, 1993). This moved art beyond its own separate dwelling and into mass cultural awareness.

In the 1960s, performance art emerged bringing an inherent participatory element to creative practice (Manovich, 2001). Happenings, performance and installations all sit within this category and bring a new level of interactivity between art and audience. Viewers are required to bring their own individual interpretation of the piece based on their personal experience. Flash mobs rely on an audience bearing witness to the event as they always take place in a location that experiences very high levels of foot traffic. Their unexpected presence within the great thoroughfares and congregation points in major cities creates conditions conducive to generating the element of surprise.

Performance art also emerged in many senses to move beyond surprise and fervently challenge the boundaries of social acceptability during a decade of social and political upheaval. Flash mobs are not necessarily controversial, though writings in online media forms such as newspapers (Goldstein, 2003) and cultural periodicals (Vanderbilt, 2004) have proclaimed their position within performance art. Academic literature on the flash mob has since acknowledged this description (Molnar, 2009; Walker, 2011). Despite these acknowledgements, flash mobs are still not synonymous with art in the public consciousness. This is demonstrated by published definitions in reference media (OED, 2008, Sieber, 2010, Urban Dictionary, 2012). Their status as an art form has become less pronounced due to recent events, also classified as flash mobs, which significantly differ from Wasik's mobs of 2003.

It has been suggested that flash mobs interfere with, and perhaps rebel against, capitalist processes. Such suggestions support the theories of Guy Debord and the

Situationists[12] in their 'interrupt[ion of] the regular flow of daily life' (F.O.U.R., 2008). The Situationists were a counter culture group particularly involved in performance-based activities (Gore, 2010). Situationists proclaimed these performance practices to be art that attempted to defy commodification (Nicholson, 2004). The creators of these events aimed to provide an opportunity to step outside the constraints of capitalism and beyond the compartmentalised lives of individual citizens. 'Desire and disruption overtake order and containment' (Fuery and Fuery, 2003, p. 37). They hoped to encourage others to adopt this same rejection of capitalism. The celebration of the mundane was embraced and 'glamorised' (F.O.U.R., 2008). Both Gore (2010) and Nicholson (2004) speak explicitly of the links between flash mobs and the Happenings of the Situationists. Nicholson (2004) specifically draws connections that have been made by early flash mob participants to Happenings[13]. The creation of an interactive audience and the motivation to rebel are elements of twentieth-century performance art practices that can be linked to the flash mob phenomenon.

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[12] The Situationists International was a revolutionary group founded in the late 1950s whose central theory was the active construction of situations (Debord, 1958).

[13] Happenings was the name given to the performance practice of the Situationists. Their performance blurred the lines between performer and audience and by extension performance and life (Vanderbilt, 2004). Vanderbilt (2004) states that these events were intended to highlight the banality of the accepted modes of artistic practice of the era by demonstrating an unusual alternative. This interruption of the everyday is also an evident feature of the flash mob.

GLOBALISATION

Imagine a young man age 19, ready and waiting to freeze in time at the city train station. His t-shirt depicts the Logo of the Thai beer Tiger, the location of his recent holiday between finishing high school and starting university. The fabric of the t-shirt however was manufactured in China. He checks his Finnish developed Nokia phone to monitor the time. The earphones leading from his phone play a tune by the British band *The Kooks* and he quickly finished the last of his samosa from the Indian takeaway restaurant around the corner. He hopes that this flash mob reaches the million plus viewer clips he has viewed on YouTube via his US created MacBookPro. He has recently moved to the city to study at the university, having driven there with his Japanese manufactured Mitsubishi filled to the brim two months ago. He is planning to use this experience for his first year Sociology course, applying it to the work of French theorist Guy Debord. His German lecturer is a keen supporter of in-field research. The global links are endless.

Globalisation is a significant means through which flash mobs are realised and can be defined as the spread of money, people and goods across the planet (Curriculum Corporation, 2008). This is a ubiquitous process worldwide that fosters the continual creation, strengthening and expansion of global links.

Globalisation was a term coined following the end of World War II. It was used to describe the need to assist those many countries that would need significant reparations. It has come to mean a great many things but from a semantic perspective can most simply be defined as 'the act of globalising' (Gove, 1981, as cited in Van Krieken et al, 2006), global meaning 'worldwide' (Forbes, Knight & Turner, 1984, as cited in Van Krieken et al, 2006). The process of becoming worldwide has followed numerous trajectories and holds very different implications for the various stakeholders involved. It involves the transfer of capital, the movement of populations and consumables across the world utilising technological developments in transport and communication technologies. Addressing the case study of the flash mob within the context of globalisation is crucial, as this process is the enabler of the flash mob on many different levels. Flash mobs are the creation of the collective thoughts and will of global citizens.

Developments in technology have been pre-eminent in forwarding the globalisation process and the drive for connection across the globe has in turn

furthered the improvement and proliferation of these technologies. The world has ostensibly become a 'smaller' place with 'increases in the speed and scope of transport and communication' (Giddens, 1990, p. 18). It is a circular and intricately interwoven web whose links have exponentially increased with the advent of mobile communication devices and the Internet. Flash mobs have arisen as one of the many opportunities and potentialities that this intensification of our social lives has afforded (Giddens, 1990).

Flash mobsters have made extensive use of personal communication technological products and have inspired advertisers and other promotional practitioners within the global capitalist economic realm (Donner, 2007). Flash mobs would be impossible without global network technologies and they would not have eventuated without the inclination of the public to extend their own links. The extent to which flash mobs have spread across the globe and entered the global consciousness of popular culture is a clear example of this phenomenon.

On the other hand, through the protests at global summits, there has been significant reaction to the potential negative impacts of globalisation due to the exploitation of unequal positions of power entering this global whirlpool. Flash mob events, though using the tools of globalisation, are in a sense seeking to reconnect at a direct and local level. This harks back to Frankfurt School scholar Guy Debord's theory and suggests that flash mobs, when considered as relational art, can be said to critique the experience of urbanisation and urban life within globalisation (Tapper, 2006). Though many participants it seems would not label the act a critique (Benton, 2004; Stephanie Lake, October 12, 2011), flash mobs do embody a physically rooted and localised visuality.

Globalisation has provided the tools that have stimulated and enabled the flash mob. The development of this phenomenon can conversely also be seen as a reaction that in part works to counteract the omnipresence of this process within contemporary society.

FLASH MOB LITERATURE

Different elements of the flash mob have received varying levels of attention in academic scholarship. A significant proportion of previous writings on the subject exist in popular media sources, such as newspapers, online magazines or cultural news websites (Vanderbilt, 2004; The Loop, 2011; Burkeman, 2009; Charlie, 2010). These sources generally involve a brief description of the phenomenon, often outlining its emergence. The major focus of these articles is often to explain details of a recent particular flash mob event. They comment on the immediate reaction to the event and the impact it had on the usual routine workings of that location.

Articles reporting on flash mobs that closely adhere to the defining features of brevity of performance and quick, complete dispersal do not incite notable controversy in media publications. However some flash mobs, particularly those that extend and transgress from initial definitions, are reported to have resulted in local legislative action to restrict these events (Burkeman, 2009). In such articles, references to both the impingement on personal freedoms and social disturbance are issues that have been raised in consideration of different stakeholders (the participants and the general public respectively). Societal reactions and the shifting boundaries of social acceptance of various flash mob practices provide important demarcations in establishing the significance of this phenomenon.

Academic writings are continuing to emerge (Walker, 2011; Tonkin, 2012). Undergraduate students are examining, organising and participating in these events, particularly in the USA, as part of sociology courses (Department of Sociology North Western University, 2011; Brown, 2012). Flash mobs have been used to examine sociological theories covering topics such as collective behaviour and social movements (Western Illinois University, 2011). In this context, flash mobs are being utilised to demonstrate or provide data for the application of particular sociological theories. In this study the flash mob itself is the subject of analysis.

Many scholars have addressed the increasing role of communication technologies in the lives of individuals and communities over the past two decades (Rheingold, 2000; Rheingold, 2003; Lanier, 2011; Ito, 2005). However, such tools as mobile phones and the Internet are often assessed from a broader perspective. This thesis uses a specific example of the utilisation of these tools to begin to construct a thick description (Edwards, 1999) of the flash mob.

Scholarly interest in the flash mob phenomenon has often been limited to relatively brief commentary. Earlier articles approach the flash mob as a novel but generalised practice and use the first collection of events termed as flash mobs as their case studies. More recent writings spend time constructing and explaining particular categories of flash mob and linking these with the communication trends of contemporary society. Some more lengthy studies such as Molnar (2009) and Walker (2011) provide a much greater depth of analysis. Both studies present a trajectory of the flash mob, describing the influence of important historical social movements and the categories of events tied by the key phrase 'flash mob'. Molnar (2009) and Walker (2011) speak to the potential of the flash mob to transform the use of public space and bring forth a practice reliant on physical congregation in a world dominated by virtual community.

The flash mob is a living and evolving phenomenon. This thesis acknowledges, adds to and builds upon these previous commentaries to discuss the developments in the evolution of the flash mob.

CONSUMERISM AND VISUAL CULTURE

Analysis of capital consumerism and the field of visual culture are closely connected. The field of visual culture is widely accepted as having emerged during the appearance of novel nineteenth century consumptive practices (Cartwright & Sturken, 2005). Gunning (1997) states that the modern urban environment of the late nineteenth century was the true beginning of an inextricable link between capitalist consumerism and visual stimuli. It was the inaugural era of direct academic interest in the manner in which people 'look' and the influence this has on their way of life.

Urbanisation and industrialisation during this period were key phenomena intrinsically bound up with the development of modern capitalist societies. These changes brought about much greater availability of general consumables. The display of these items and consequent shopping rituals experienced significant growth and transformation, especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Gaslight extended the reach of streets of shop window enticements into the dark of night.

New heights of absorption within urban consumption ensued – a non-speaking, completely visually oriented gawker, exemplified in Poe's stranger (Gunning, 1997), epitomises this relationship to the visual. The idea of the interior in the urban environment was completely altered. The century began with shop windows being perused while strolling the streets. Then arcades brought 'a world in miniature' to 'interior boulevards' (Benjamin, 1982 as cited in Buck-Morss, 1991), first in Paris and then in cities across the globe. These covered alleys lined with retail shops were the subjects of Walter Benjamin's final undertaking *The Arcades Project* (a lengthy and uncompleted study), in line with his commitment to the close study of everyday visual practices.

The Crystal Palace built for the 1851 Great Exhibition in London was a grand structure of open aisles and display cabinets. The manner in which these spaces and exhibits were configured and utilised, involved a partial reversal and expansion of Foucault's later Panopticism.[14] Based on Jeremy Bentham's designs of the panopticon,

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[14] Foucault's works were retrospective analyses of the visual power structures that emerged during the nineteenth century and are still considered extremely important within and outside the field of visual culture studies (Bennett, 1995). This accompanying theoretical analysis on surveillance remains applicable to contemporary environments beyond specific architectural structures. Omniscient surveillance in the form of

Bennett (1995) suggests the Crystal Palace required self-regulation of behaviour through the creation of a ubiquitous duality of seeing and being seen. Following soon after, the emergence of the first department stores was a broader application of this same surveillance model. This marked the realisation of department stores such as Harrods and Macy's. Roaming through the streets and subsequent undercover walkways was literally brought indoors and wandering was directed through merchandise and company branding (Gunning, 1997). Shopping centres today retain patent similarities to their nineteenth-century counterparts and continue to play a major role in the dominant consumer culture.

Emergent retail practices in the late nineteenth century were key evidence for Marx's[15] theories on commodity fetishisation (Evans & Hall, 2004). This concept is the illusory belief that items have an inherent aesthetic value, completely alienated from the original labour source that Marx sees as the site of a product's true value (Evans, 2004). Architectural structures dedicated to shopping serve to display items for purchase, with no visible relationship to their means of production. Marx explains this as an inevitable route to blind, meaningless and unsatisfiable consumption that has people and societies operating outside their reasonable means (Crouch, 1999).

This critique of consumption within modern capitalism that took hold in the nineteenth century has continued to the present day. Scholars of the Frankfurt School during the mid-twentieth century strongly followed Marxist theories and vehemently targeted the detrimental nature of consumer capitalism. Adorno (a pre-eminent scholar of the Frankfurt School) suggested that the individual in this postmodern world is defined by what he or she consumes and that society as a whole operates within the confines of consumerism (Crouch, 1999). Adorno's pessimistic attitude towards capitalism is clearly exemplified by his Marxist driven 'culture industry' theory. Even items with great pretension to aesthetic value are seen simply as commodified entertainment. This perspective holds little hope for the existence of meaningful communication separate from the predictable tropes of technology driven consumerism. According to these theorists, it is almost impossible in a world so driven by the forces of capitalism, utilising tools that only emphasise capitalism's stronghold,

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CCTV (Close Circuit Television), employed in urban centres throughout the world, is a clear example of the enduring relevance of Foucault's theory of self-regulation.

[15] Karl Marx (1818-83) was a socialist theorist who responded to the process of Industrialisation in Western Europe during the nineteenth century. His theories on the alienation of the labour force through the mechanisation of the means of production in the name of capitalism formed the basis of his key written work, *A Communist Manifesto* (Van Krieken et al, 2006).

to in any way escape its far-reaching effects. These perspectives are still influential in the contemporary context.

Adorno sees art as one possible avenue to achieve freedom from the role of consumer and gives art the responsibility of disrupting the capitalist system. Adorno was therefore very concerned by the blatant self-admission of art as a commodity that emerged with 1960s Pop Art practices led by Andy Warhol. The open contrariness of Pop Art, exploiting celebrity and mass media, shattered his concept of art as a disruptor of systematic commodification (Crouch, 1999).

Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, formally published in 1999, is a canonical text that closely addresses his fascination with the relationship between knowledge structures and visual technologies (Schwarz & Przyblyski, 2004). This text highlights key changes to image creating technologies during this period, which consequently sparked considerable academic interest in modes of viewing. Benjamin (1999) heralds photography, a nineteenth-century invention, as 'the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction' (p. 218). He emphasises the speed of the process and outlines a complete transference of production - the power of creation described as shifted from the hand to the eye. Benjamin (1999) cites Paul Valery's likening of the growing ease of access to plumbing and electric facilities to the similarly increased access to various forms of imagery. Photography is a dominant feature in this proliferation of imagery. Benjamin uses Valery's comparison to highlight the opportunities that technological advancements provide (p.265).

Crouch (1999), in a more recent examination, also highlights the means of distribution: the role of industrialisation not only in mass production but also in the creation of the transport and economic infrastructure that allowed photographic images to be viewed (Crouch, 1999, p.92). Crouch presents this immediacy as a double-edged sword - quick distribution also results in speedy obsolescence (Crouch, 1999, p. 94). Benjamin serves as a progenitor, as his observations about photography and modes of viewing are applicable to the flash mob's diffusion across the globe. Further acceleration of dissemination can be observed when considering other more recent technological developments integral to the flash mob. These developments include film and satellite and cable technologies that allow for the global distribution of imagery through multi-national media conglomerates. Insights gained in assessing the impact that new visual media have on the way the world is viewed is an important discovery highlighted by Benjamin's analysis of such developments in the nineteenth century.

The documentation of this process of influence on viewership remains pertinent to the contemporary flash mob phenomenon.

Both Benjamin and Crouch begin by presenting photography and film within the constructs of Modernism: a means through which to disseminate ideas and continue societal progress. There is similar emphasis on their ability to reach exponentially larger audiences and an admission that the development of capitalism provided an excellent driving force for this dissemination. The conscious orchestration of an illusory false reality is presented as overriding the desire to simply reflect the world around us. Shifts such as this are demonstrated with the assistance of comparisons to long established art forms. The two authors acknowledge the destructive possibilities of the photographic and filmic media. However, Benjamin retains a greater positivity than Crouch's conclusions that focus on Adorno's misgivings with the commodification of art that was sealed by photography and film.

The formal study of visual culture was born out of scholarly fascination with the new features of this modern urban world; environs in which people were compelled to look and in turn be looked at. Another concern of visual culture is the post-modern recognition of multiple truths in abandonment of modernity's quest for indisputable answers (Schwarz and Przyblyski, 2004). Modernity identified a considerable number of questions amongst the constantly changing crowds, lights, shops and streets. Visual power structure theories arising from modern constructivist concepts emphasised visuality's influence on culture (Bennett, 1995), particularly in consumptive practices. A contemporary example is the resurgence of Poe's flâneur through modes of consumption such as window-shopping and shopping online or generally glancing through today's fast-paced, multi-faceted and digitally mediated society. Initiated by this more evenly spread or democratised power theory was a significant leap in the characterisation of a dynamic relationship between people and constructions of the visual (Bennett, 1995).

Poe and Benjamin were two important contributors to the origins of visual culture. As such, their works, considerably embedded in the viewing practices of the nineteenth century, have been the subject of analysis in this chapter. Understanding their perceptions and theories can perhaps be viewed as constructing some of the first scaffoldings of the field, to be added to and built upon. This study attempts to make clear the persistent inextricable links to these early writings – they have not disappeared or become smaller, they have been appended and expanded. The visual narratives we create are often working to sate the modern day detective within us or

alternatively we can be seen to apply this approach to visual information that we encounter. New technologies and accompanying consumptive practices, of which the Internet is of paramount importance, are crucial devices in the detective's investigation toolbox. Many nineteenth-century visual mechanisms are in still use now and even for those that have become obsolete or changed dramatically, contemporary parallels and comparisons can be made to these long-established theories on spectatorship. While there has been an acknowledgement of plural explanations and self-critique within society and more specifically the field of visual culture, the compulsions established by nineteenth-century viewing practices remain relevant.

PUNCTUM

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (2000) outlines two conditions, studium and punctum, which are utilised in his explanation of the photographic medium. Studium is described as an applying of oneself to something with a general enthusiastic commitment but without special acuity (p. 26). Punctum is defined as punctuating or piercing the state of studium; generally a part or portion of an image, vision or experience that stings or pricks the individual (p. 27). Punctum attracts or draws the viewer and is not present in all things. Studium requires a context and a code to understand and process; punctum does not. Punctum resides in immediate sensory experience.

Barthes spoke of these terms in relation to images, specifically photographs. However, the theory can be expanded to include all sights and experiences and consequently provide an overarching theoretical concept for the analysis flash mob activity. The intention of surprise, or to create a moment of punctum, is an elemental feature of the flash mob that can be inferred from the conventions described in the term's definition (OED, 2008).

Despite the overt articulation of organisers and certain accepted definitions that claim flash mobs are free of purpose, it can be argued that the concept of punctum lies at its root. Flash mobs are the production of a brief moment that punctures the usual and therefore draws attention. This element of surprise has been addressed previously in this analysis and Barthe's theoretical concepts of studium versus punctum provide a concise and pertinent platform from which to summarise this multi-faceted and dynamic phenomenon. In this study, the theory of punctum will be utilised to draw together key elements of the flash mob in order to make concluding assertions regarding their underlying purpose and significance.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Beginning with an infant's realisation of the boundary between self and the surrounding world and the impact they can have on their environs, objects assist in teaching about one's place within the world (Woodward, 2007, p. 140). Objects have been explicitly linked to an individual's assertion and negotiation of identity. Flash mobs can be seen as objects. While less tangible than some, they are discrete and identifiable 'things' to which people can relate. One might wonder about the ability to develop a unique personal relationship to an event that generally possesses an extremely prescriptive format. Flash mobs appear spontaneous to the unsuspecting bystander, but much preparation and organisation that is most often distinctly led by a small number of individuals takes place prior to the event. Nonetheless, limitations and prescribed expectations to our actions are not unusual. There are countless constraints and boundaries that are placed upon our everyday existence outside the anomalous flash mob event. Despite these constraints, influences and high degrees of regulation, individuals still have the power to exercise a significant level of agency in their interaction with objects. There are many choices involved in the construction and integration of objects within our lives (and our accompanying memories) that assist in developing an enduring understanding of the self. 'Things' play significant roles in the development of identity.

While much analysis within material culture has focussed on broader socio-cultural trends, there have been studies that highlight processes that take place at an individual level (Lash & Urry, 1994). Objects in this thesis, often less tangible events or screen-based items, are addressed as material forms of memory. In this analysis these mnemonic objects include the flash mob event itself, the photographs and films that are taken, collected and often uploaded on the web, and the online commentary that exists as evidence of people's experience of flash mob events. Investigation of these items involves addressing the history or set of narratives that exist within and around the objects and most importantly the development of personal narrative in response to these items. External stimuli do not autonomously work to shape people and this process does not function at a superficial level.

Key concepts used by material culture scholars such as Woodward, Levi-Strauss, Csikszentmihalyi and Urry provide a platform for analysis of the flash mob's links to identity. Miller and Tilley (1996), the founding editors of the *Journal of Material*

Culture, state that the major focus of this interdisciplinary research journal is to explore 'the ways in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities' (p. 5). The field of material culture is founded upon the belief that our character is defined not only by our thoughts and words but also by the 'things' we own, use and keep in close proximity. They can speak to status, express lifestyle choices, opinions and tastes – elements that Woodward equates with one's identity.

Identity is explicitly defined as an individual's 'socially determined sense of who they are' (Woodward, 2007, p. 134). This involves the distinguishing of individual characteristics and beliefs as well as their role within different societal groups - family, work or otherwise. Woodward outlines the sociological perspective on identity in detail, presenting its three distinct aspects: social/objective identity which involves one's demographic profile, self/subjective identity encompassing personal characteristics, and the ego identity that addresses an individual's awareness and level of contentment with his or her sense of self and belonging. These three elements of identity will be considered in constructing an identity profile of flash mob participants and organisers.

People-object relations are identified as the primary means of constructing identity (Klee, 2007). Woodward identifies a richness of largely untapped resources in the exploration of 'hard' identity, that is questions considering self-cultivation, psychological meaning and personality development. These elements of identity are comparatively more pervasive and persistent in contrast to the more commonly studied outer or surface level identity that is more easily changed and manipulated. Foster (2002) expresses the desire for items that conform to a particular fashion as largely based on aesthetics – the exterior rather than the interior. While participation in flash mobs immediately adds to an individual's external identity, making it outwardly available for comment, questions of motivation linked to an internal sense of self are vital to consider to understanding the flash mobster.

Woodward distinguishes the importance that objects play in the lives of individuals. This allows an expansion of material culture in relation to flash mobs along a spectrum from small and 'discrete items' to what Woodward called 'complex, network objects' (Woodward, 2007, p. 3). 'Social markers' (objects inextricably linked to an individual's class or social group) and 'identity markers' (items closely linked with personal beliefs) are two of Woodward's three major object roles that emphasise links to elements of identity. The functionality and expressive nature of objects are distinguished and discussed as two separate but interrelated elements of the object-

person relationship. Their practical uses are differentiated from their links to 'status and honour, which individuals must negotiate' (Woodward, 2007, p. 134). To understand the significance of items in the material world, both elements must be addressed. However the element of practical use has limitations in this analysis, as it is extremely difficult to substantiate any inherently pragmatic uses for flash mob events and their associated productions. Therefore it is the expressive nature of the flash mob, the status, beliefs and personal characteristics that participants wish to convey through their involvement, that will form the crux of this exploration of identity.

Aspects of Freud's psychoanalytic theory are a catalyst for establishing a clear relationship between objects and desire. Fromm (1976) asserts that modern consumers have become pathological consumers, fuelling their desire to compensate for their internal identity conflicts by accumulating relationships with an increasing number of objects. Object-relations analysis has expanded to include the sating of emotional and psychological needs consistent with any type of relationship, whether it is between people or otherwise (Schultz et al, 1989). The practice of developing relationships with consumer items constitutes a pervasive and dominant element of identity formation today, emanating from the beginnings of capitalist consumer culture in the nineteenth-century. The range of consumer choices that we are afforded in contemporary society strongly supports the expression of our identity through products based on the choices we make in retail outlets. The active choice of and interaction with particular objects, that people undertake in order to meet their perceived needs, influences and shapes their sense of self (Lash & Urry, 1994). 'Things' serve to create, fulfil and maintain a sense of self. This widely observable strong propensity for attributing objects with meaning and power can be defined by the psychoanalytic term cathexis (Seidenberg and Cochrane, 1964).

Projection (the placement of one's values or opinions onto another) and introjection (the reverse) are presented as elemental psychoanalytic processes at work in developing relationships (Chodorow, 1978). With inanimate objects, individuals project belief onto objects as well as incorporating elements of objects into their person. Applied to flash mobs, the theories of projection and introjection consider the role individuals have in overlaying their own beliefs onto flash mob events and the incorporation of the values of the flash mob itself within the values or opinions of the individual respectively. This very personal, individualised theoretical approach diverges from broader theories on fashions and cultural rules. However, Woodward (2007) believes that this central focus on addressing the issue of individual desire for objects

can work in conjunction and within the overarching sociological constructs concerning consumption or social difference (p. 140). Some canonical texts that directly tackle 'the interaction between emotion, self and consumption' (Woodward, 2007, p. 141) are cited. Baudrillard (1968), Campbell (1995) and McCracken's (1998) works, while not explicitly psychoanalytical, all privilege strong psychological underpinnings as explanations for consumption and the relationship between people and objects that align their literature with psychoanalytical approaches.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1983), in his collected essays entitled *Structural Anthropology*, provides examples that give further insight into the multitude of influences on an individual's formation and recollection of identity narratives. Identifiable personal traits and values linked to particular items have been explored as pervasive markers of identity. This speaks to the dynamic power play that occurs between oneself and the surrounding environment. In examining this relationship, it is necessary to look beyond viewing flash mobs as 'meaningless', as within object-relations theories of material culture all external stimuli to which one relates are viewed as significant. However, the degree to which we recognise, consciously remember and understand the impacts that our use of objects has on our identity is debatable. Inferences of this nature must be carefully analysed and well supported with evidence. People who interact with flash mob events are involved in the negotiation of their identity during this interplay. The possibilities of meaning in the flash mob-individual relationship and the consequential impact on their identity are many. Demographic profile and the significance of place are examples of factors that influence this relationship that are explored in Chapter Two's analysis of flash mobster identity.

Chapter Two:

THE NATURE

'We LOVE to create JOY by surprising people! We are looking for like-minded people who love to challenge themselves, get up and dance (even if they've never danced before!' (Meetup, 2012).

Mobs are often viewed in a negative light. However, a 'smart mob', that is a group of individuals that precisely communicate to perform collective acts, 'do not consist exclusively of dark scenarios' (Rheingold, 2003, p. xxii)[16]. Flash mobs speak to the lighter and spectacularly enlivening possibilities of the mob. Chapter One provided the theoretical basis for the analysis of the flash mob. Chapter Two involves the direct application of this theory. Concepts of spectacle, modes of viewing and the assertion of identity through the involvement in flash mob events are discussed.

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[16] According to Savage (2003), it was Rheingold's smart mob that inspired the coining of the term flash mob. The flash mob can be inextricably linked to the 'smart mob' and can be viewed as an extension of Rheingold's term.

THE SPECTACULAR FLASH MOB

An exemplary flash mob event was *Frozen Grand Central,* an event performed in New York City's Grand Central Terminus in January 2008. There are two quite separate definitions of the 'spectacle' that can be applied to such events to assist in the process of unravelling the nature of this phenomenon.

Organised by a group called Improv Everywhere[17], *Frozen Grand Central* saw over 200 people assemble, and perform the simple but unusual task of freezing for five minutes before casually dispersing. The participants did not acknowledge the spectators or the other individuals involved.

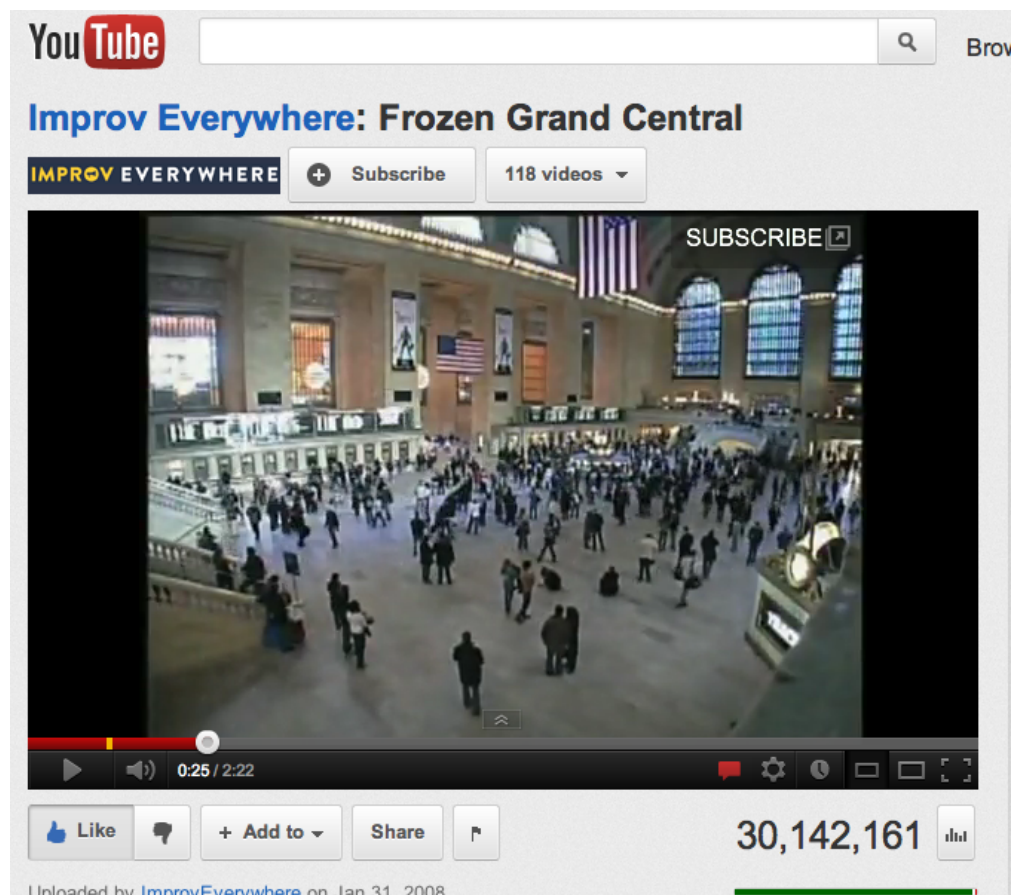Figure 1. Screenshot of official Improv Everywhere (2008) footage of *Frozen Grand Central* from YouTube.

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[17] Improv Everywhere is an organisation established following a 'prank' one of the creators carried out pretending to be Ben Folds (the singer) in a New York City bar in 2001. Since then, the group has expanded to involve thousands of participants in dozens of different 'missions' (Todd & Scordelis, 2009).

Organisational groups such as Improv Everywhere operate via social media websites and are the most common way in which flash mob events have been organised over the past five years. However, the creators of Improv Everywhere (2011) insist that their events are not flash mobs. While founding creator Charlie Todd (Improv Everywhere, 2011) acknowledges the similarity of some of their events with the conventions of the flash mob, he clearly states that Improv Everywhere are not flash mobs. To Todd, the term 'flash mob' has been misused and abused by the media and has lost its meaning as it has been utilised to describe such a large variety of events (Improv Everywhere, 2011). The definition of flash mob provided in the introduction is comparatively narrow in light of recent usage of the flash mob label in popular media. *Frozen Grand Central* was a 'public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform[ed] a pointless act and then disperse[d] again' (OED, 2008) and is therefore considered a quintessential example of the flash mob.

Flash mobs like *Frozen Grand Central* can aptly be described as spectacle (a performance or display that is visually striking) (OED, 2008). Spectacles may conjure feelings of curiosity, admiration or even contempt (Kan, 2012). While generally viewed as a largely visual stimulus, spectacles are very often accompanied by sound and can also appeal to the kinaesthetic senses.

The Ancient Greeks developed a clear sense of the spectacle in their theatrical practice. Aristotle noted that the sensory experience of a true spectacle produces an observable impact in the viewer's emotional state (Kan, 2004). Emotive reactions can range from shock and distress, to enjoyment or adoration. Spectacles within contemporary society have spread far beyond the bounds of the theatre. Technology in the forms of film and photography has enabled the transformation of the spectacle across multiple media platforms from television series to 3D action films and game consoles to public installations of screened images.

Flash mobs are another form of contemporary spectacle. A co-founder of Improv Everywhere, states that their events are aimed at creating the comedy of theatre anywhere (Partners Project, 2011). A participant of the SydMob flash mob group (whose events were most prevalent in the mid-2000s) told radio station Triple J's *Hack* (2004) program that the events made people happy but also had bystanders thinking participants were 'crazy' (Benton, 2004). These are examples of the emotive power of the spectacle as described by flash mob participants - the audience's affect is altered by inciting humour or feelings of happiness. The spectacle also involves visually arresting its viewers, grabbing and holding their attention in order to provoke such

feelings. In an interview with social media news website Partners Project (2011), Improv Everywhere's Charlie Todd explained that the idea of their events is to continually invent new ideas to surprise people. One SydMob event involved a large group of participants tapping saucepans with tongue depressors in the central business district (CBD) Myer department store (Benton, 2004). The bizarre nature of this activity works to engage passersby. The strange and unexpected are techniques the flash mob relies upon to achieve the visual and emotional impact of the spectacle.

The flash mob can be seen as an extension or elaboration of the usual ebb and flow of city dwellers circulating within their urban environment. People converge in spaces such as major intersections and train stations and quickly disperse again in different directions. Spontaneous choreography occurs at these sites as individuals dodge and weave to successfully and harmoniously negotiate the crowd (Rheingold, 2003). Flash mobs exploit the naturally occurring movement of people to produce a spectacular and surprising version of this everyday process.

Flash mobs appear to have shifted from actions that seem strange and somewhat confrontational into more grand and intricately choreographed spectacular performances. Visual spectacle seems to have become more of a priority, as mass freeze and dance flash mobs have become increasingly popular. Tapping saucepans with tongue depressors (Benton, 2004) or converging on a department store rug spouting nonsense comments to the shop assistants (Nicholson, 2005) as in early flash mobs, appears to have been superseded by large-scale song and/or dance routines. Furthermore, as people become increasingly aware of the concept, events are more easily identified as flash mobs. This reduces the unease and confusion of that apparently experienced by shop assistants in the 'Love Rug' flash mob at a Sydney *Myer* department store (Benton, 2004). Flash mobs have become more distinct and structured than early department store floor exhibitions and often embody a sense of celebration.

Alternative to widely understood definitions of the spectacle is Guy Debord's definition of the term. In contrast to Aristotle's definition of individual sensory overwhelm, Debord's spectacle is an ideological stance that criticises the capitalist superstructure (Kan, 2004). 'Capitalist superstructure' was a term used by Marx to describe the set of overarching ideologies involved in the modes of production of capitalism (Feluga, 2011). Debord regards the spectacle as an omnipresent indivisible fusion of capitalist practices surrounding production and consumption. This is synonymous with the Frankfurt School's 'culture industry' and the 'production of

consumption' (du Gay et al, 1997). Consumption, according to these theories, is seen as a predetermined reaction to the directives of the production process (Evans and Hall, 1997). Debord's modern spectacle is his description of the ubiquitous presence of the market economy in the modern world. Debord, a Situationist, calls for the disruption of this society of the spectacle. Tempest Waters, an organiser of the SydMob group, strongly asserts that simple fun and a sense of liberation are the closest one could come to discerning the meaning behind flash mobs (Benton, 2004). This element of liberation in performing for no other reason than enjoyment suggests that flash mobs perhaps have the potential to achieve Debord's goal. They provide an opportunity to escape the prescribed, economic outcome driven spectacle of capitalist consumption.

Bobby Bonsey, an organiser of the *Seattle Glee Flash Mob* that in April, 2011 ran for its second year (and is preparing for its third in 2012), states that the purpose of the flash mob is to spread good will and says that these events he has coordinated mean to just make people smile (Charlie, 2010).

Figure 2. Screenshot of inaugural *Glee* flash mob in Seattle (Onedegreeevents, 2010).

This statement fails to acknowledge the *Glee* precursor to their Seattle Flash Mob. It is clearly a celebration of fans of the television program and also recreates the spontaneous musical nature of the show itself. It is an *homage* to this musical sit-com. Bobby goes on to elaborate that he became involved with the *Glee* Seattle Flash Mob after his involvement in a Michael Jackson tribute flash mob, a memorial to a popular culture icon. The *Glee* and Michael Jackson tribute flash mobs are events that conversely strengthen the spectacle that Debord desperately wanted to be broken down. These flash mobs demonstrate the consumer's ability to reproduce or add to the existing spectacle that surrounds key elements of today's culture industry - pop stars and cult television series.

The reinforcement of the society of the spectacle places the status of the flash mob in a somewhat precarious position. As discussed in the introduction, Situationists and their Happenings of the 1960s are seminal performative practices that fit within historical precedents of the flash mob. These practices arose in protest against capitalist modes of production and consumption. In addition, flash mobsters proudly profess to and do appear to be operating outside their prescribed roles as consumers. Many flash mobs serve to disrupt the flow of capitalism by physically interrupting the busy commercial hubs of large urban centres, albeit temporarily. They are not a phenomenon that was originally created for consumers by producers. Flash mobs were a surprise addition to the urban plane, emerging sporadically and by definition in a very unpredictable manner.

Members of the public often assume that flash mobs are a promotion technique, sponsored by large corporations or organisations (S. Wikaira, October 15, 2011, Improv Everywhere, January 31, 2008). While this is not the aim of flash mobs as defined in the OED (2008), a growing trend in this direction is evident (see discussion in Chapter Three). In addition, all flash mobs unavoidably rely on the tools of the market economy to organise, stage, record and disseminate their performance. Computers and mobile phones are items of consumption themselves and are paramount in enabling the proliferation of the consumption of flash mob events across the globe.[18]

Flash mobs can simultaneously be included within Debord's more problematic and ideological interpretation of the spectacle and also embrace his goal for the disruption of the spectacle. The question this predicament raises is whether it is

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[18] The means by which flash mobs are organised, recorded and dispersed will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

possible that disruption and creation of the spectacle are not mutually exclusive. Flash mobs appear to harbour, in Debord's terms, elements of two opposing forces. From a level of basic semantics, the flash mob is certainly synonymous with 'spectacle' as spectators bear witness to an event that shares the visually arresting performance elements of the broader definition of the word. However to say they are a 'movement that has no movement behind it besides [the fact that] it's funny' (Partners Project, 2011), is too simplistic and superficial.

It is important to periodically reassess whether the nature of flash mobs can best be described as embracing or alternatively rejecting the capitalist consumerist spectacle. The spectacular features according to the commonly accepted definition of this term are also evident in the unexpected and visually arresting celebratory flash mob events. The latter embodies the visceral and immediate surprise as explained by Barthe's concept of punctum while consideration of Debord's concept of the spectacle requires contextual evidence and deeper analysis. Flash mobs are spectacles; the nature of this spectacle is open to multiple interpretations.

MODES OF VIEWING APPLIED

The city exists in the time and space of the physical streets, alleyways and intersections of urban centres across the world but is also an environment that can now be virtually wondered at, trawled or perused. Given the imposing identity of the city itself, it is difficult to discern whether flash mobs stimulated the use of urban spaces or whether urban spaces alternatively incited the flash mob. The correlation is self-evident and there is a causal relationship that remains unclear. Regardless of the nature of the power relationship between the cityscape and the flash mob, these events do occur within urban spaces and consequently re-create contemporary versions of Poe's viewers.

An analysis of the modes of viewing and consequent viewing personas that the flash mob creates, raises conflicting notions as to their nature. Comparisons can be drawn to Poe's three viewers that arose from his experiences of the early urban consumer culture of nineteenth-century Parisian streets. The motivations of the participants and the different roles involved in the flash mob phenomenon will be examined in this section.

The bricoleur, a combination of the three viewers, is reborn in the negotiation between public space and this urban performance phenomenon. This bricoleur can be likened to Carr's (1993) twentieth-century urban gypsy, taking on the characteristics of differing modes of viewing while wandering and traversing the various elements of the urban environment.

Singular expressions of Poe's three viewing personas are also evident. Being caught in the thick of a flash mob event sparks the badaud or awestruck gawker – spectators bewildered but enamoured by the event that has surrounded them. At times these unsuspecting passersby become so engrossed and captivated by the phenomenon, they also begin to participate in the spectacle (Lifesforsharing, 2009a). The scale and unexpected start and finish of these events add to the wonderment experienced by the unassuming audience.

The flâneur, the detached viewer, alternatively exists in those observing from the edges, those who recognise the phenomenon as something familiar and perhaps record from a vantage point mildly intrigued or amused. Trawling the Internet for flash mobs, switching and changing between websites, watching partial clips and reading fractions of forum postings and articles embody the perusal of the flâneur. The flâneur

is seen in the casual YouTube browser, stopping to watch various videos of different lengths, angle and quality that have attempted to capture a particular flash mob event. Browsing the Internet supports the detached and casual nature of the flâneur's mode of exploration.

The nooks and crannies of the city also inspire an investigative approach to discover the possibilities of its landscape and inhabitants. Flash mobs require action and immersion within the urban environment in cooperation with fellow city dwellers. The advent of this practice suggests that window-shopping or Internet browsing at home does not satisfy all. The detective, unlike the flâneur, is driven by intimate human intrigue. Ever-changing visual spectacles of moving crowds transfer energy to the spectator, turning passive spectatorship into active participation. The idleness of the flâneur is decreasingly relevant in the industrious, productivity-driven modern society. Day and night, the vitality and energetic bustle of the city serves to push and pull the viewer through streets and laneways. There are dark labyrinths beneath the exterior impressions of its buildings. The 'bird's-eye view' or more distant observation of the flâneur is not satisfactory – the 'mole's-eye view' must also be employed (Kasson, as cited by Gunning, 1997, p. 38). The detective is evident in those who attend flash mobs either to participate or record. They are actively engaging with the urban space, exploring the possibilities of this environment and taking their intrigue beyond the laconic or awestruck lack of movement that characterises the badaud or the flâneur.

The kaleidoscope is an excellent examples that Gunning provides of a pleasurable visual spectacle. No concrete object is necessary; a pleasing array of colourful compositions produces the desired gawker. Aligning the flash mob with the kaleidoscope produces a pleasing congruence in the imagination. People are scattered, then form a seemingly predetermined pattern and then disperse into randomness again, dressed in all manner of attire from all walks of life. The people are the glinting beads, beaming with enjoyment and simple aesthetic purpose. The kaleidoscope can also be used to represent the ever-changing flickering lights and colours of the modern urban environment. However, as seen by the detective, there are layers to the city – the too bright kaleidoscope and the very dark labyrinth of unseen machinery. As with the kaleidoscope, there is much calculation behind the spectacle of the flash mob. It is a dazzling cover, over processes of construction and power. This analogy supports the role of the transfixing visual spectacle and accompanying mode of visual consumption during the modern era. However, it does not negate the detective-like investigation being carried out behind the scenes by the experts. The

detectives are those aware of the systems of creation: those who devise, plan and carry out the flash mob, discreetly and with fervour.

The flash mob is an attempt to push against this society of 'channel flippers' and 'web surfers'. Successful flash mobs draw people in; it is difficult to remain casual observer - the individual that sees but does not stop for long. Although, with the fast-paced spread of knowledge, the novelty and mystery of the flash mob are quickly disappearing, forcing the badaud and detective within each of us to continue wandering the urban streets for the next new spectacle.

While the real-time experience of the successful flash mob leaves little room for the detached flâneur, this type of viewer is ever-present in homes, workplaces and cafes. The technologically competent flâneur persists in the comfort of one's lounge with laptop propped on the coffee table. This is a viewer that can comfortably browse the visual realm from a safe and rather detached position. Individuals are free to view the event repeatedly through the filter of a screen, removed from the visceral qualities of the time-based experience. This is a mode of viewing Poe did not predict.

The persistence of flash mob events a decade after their first emergence is a shift against the dominance of this screen-viewing flâneur. A flash mob requires people to become significantly more immersed in the experience. While the majority of people experience flash mobs via the Internet, their initial creation is an effort to shift our experience of our surroundings and emphasise the more tangible real world of our city streets and squares.

IDENTITY AND FLASH MOBS

The identity of the flash mobster involves an intriguing interplay between testing the boundaries of an individual's understanding of self and surrendering all concern with individual identity in order to effectively assimilate within a group. 'What the project harnessed', Wasik emphasises, 'was the *joining urge*, a drive toward deindividuation easily discernible in the New York hipster population' (Wasik, 2005, as cited in Tapper 2006). Participants are required to 'buy into' and accept the collective identity that flash mob organisers are offering in their designated event. This is the creation of a very different kind of 'mob mentality'. It does not possess aggressive and violent connotations but rather more whimsical and harmless characteristics than those of the more commonly understood meaning of the term.

The previous section explored the viewership involved in flash mobs. The modes of viewing suggested by Poe presented individuals pushed and pulled by structures and features of the urban environment, to act in particular ways. The act of the flash mob, seemingly spontaneous by definition, does hold a certain power over individuals and directs their viewing in many ways. When considering the motivations behind participation and organisation of these events, questions surrounding the concept of identity arise. Pivotal is the question concerning what significance the involvement in a flash mob holds in an individual's sense of identity, beyond the identity of the group?

Deciding to be involved in a flash mob and the degree of that involvement are choices individuals make in developing who they are or are not. The relationship between the flash mob and the individual is fundamental to exploring the concept of identity. Individuals possess the agency to develop personalised connections with items with which they interact. In alignment with this contention, flash mobs can therefore hold certain meanings for one participant and very different levels of significance for others.

Profile of a Flash Mobster

Before exploring the nature of the relationship towards the flash mob, it is useful to form an understanding of the characteristics of the individuals involved in these events. Participants in flash mobs significantly range in age. However, there is an over-representation of the millennial generation or Generation Y (born between the

beginning of the 1980s and end of the 1990s) (McFedries, 2003). The children of the baby boomer generation have largely spawned this phenomenon. Assertions have been made that as the children of suburban seeking parents, this generation instead is seeking residence in a mixed-use, more urban environment that requires less commute time (Evans, 2011).

Flash mobs embrace the urban and the cityscape, not the suburban local sports field, as the choice of playground (Nicholson, 2004). Flash mobs have been cited as the intentional reclamation of public space (Creagh, 2004) reminiscent of the *Reclaim the Streets* movement or *Critical Mass Bike Rides* of the 1990s. Alternatively it is also possible that due to the urban residential location of a large number of the predominant flash mob participant generation, it is not necessarily a conscious choice to reclaim the transient spaces of urban centres but a natural point of congregation. In a case study of Chicago residents conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), the importance of different types of objects is shown to shift with age. This change in recollection supports the assertion that identity is a shifting and changing force behind the formation of object relationships. The historical trend of the younger generation (pre-parenthood) being drawn to the city centre and all of its goings-on followed by a retreat to the suburbs upon the arrival of their offspring is one such noticeable shift (Kotkin, 2011). The difference that we see today is that the amount of time to explore the city and use it as one's playground has been extended as people delay having children often until their thirties.

The millennial generation want to be led, provided they feel aligned with and stimulated by the leader of their particular group (Duan, 2009). The millennial generation are also shown to have a strong desire for peer connections and high levels of altruism (Alsop, 2011). It is not the desire of this generation to rebel, as they generally do not possess a pessimistic outlook on life and society. While obviously a generalisation in which outliers exist, the millennial generation is 'upbeat' 'tolerant and community minded', they 'value their family and friends' and are in many ways 'quite traditional and conservative' (Savage, 2006, p. 7). But as Carr suggests, they are often geographically transient, detached from their default communities of family or childhood neighbourhood. Their desire to create and express community must be directed elsewhere. In this bustling, multi-tasking existence, outlets are being found in rehearsals that culminate in 5 minutes dancing in the square, rather than weekly sports practise at the complex around the corner.

When interviewed Stephanie Lake (October 12, 2011) , an organiser of several flash mob inspired events in Melbourne, relayed that her experience of flash mob participants (in her case flash mob dance events) was of people that were not there to make any type of political statement. She explained that their motivation appeared to come from a much more visceral desire to move their bodies as part of a group. They were motivated by the physical exhilaration they would receive from participating and the pure delight at being part of something very removed from their day-to-day routine that was 'a bit hilarious'. From her perspective, people really valued the sense of communal experience.

When applied to previously-detailed material culture theories, there are many facets to the flash mobster identity. Highlighted is the fact that the quest for identity is certainly not necessarily synonymous with asserting yourself as an individual. People seek to feel secure in their sense of belonging, as outlined by Woodward's (2007) explanation of the ego identity. Flash mob participation appears in many ways to be quite separate from the assertion of the subjective identity that involves individual personality characteristics and instead is more driven by underlying desires to establish a clear sense of one's place within the world. From a psychoanalytic perspective, people are seeking out relationships with flash mob events (the before – rehearsals/planning; the during – performance; and the after – photographs, forum posts, videos) to develop this aspect of their sense of self.

Significance of Place

In addition to the desire to build a general sense of communal belonging, there often appears to be a particular sense of honour and affinity with New York City, the location of the first flash mob events. These are events that allow individuals to embed themselves more deeply within the identity of the city. Many of those who expressed their admiration of New York, conveyed a sense 'haves' and 'have nots' in direct correlation to their city of residence.

1. 'I want to be a part of it – New York, New York!'
   - Kander and Ebb, 1977

2. '….New York,

    concrete jungle where dreams are made of,

    there's nothing you can't do,

    now you're in New York,

    these streets will make you feel brand new,

    big lights will inspire you.'

–   Empire State of Mind, Jay-Z/ Alicia Keys, 2009

–   'I LOVE NY! even though I've never been there before' – 'top' YouTube music

    video comment

3. 'New York can be anything you want it to be. It's why countless people have pinned

    their dreams on the place, thrown caution to the wind and shown up on its doorstep'

    (Lonely Planet, 2012).

Places possess their own distinct identity and human identity associations occur at the juncture where person and place meet. With a distinct latitude and longitude, places can be street intersections, houses, stretches of beach, or entire cities. The landscape features in these locations are not timeless or unchanging, neither in their materiality nor their role in one's identity (Osborne, 2001). However, their significance endures. Memories, and consequently an understanding of self, remains bound up with a sense of place. Locations hold countless symbolic meanings, beyond simply function, physical composition and ownership. Socio-cultural groups are influential in the construction of these semiotics of place.

Rak Razam, an organiser of the Australian Flash Mob group *Barrel Full of Monkeys* suggests that flash mobs arose out of the post-September 11 climate in New York City as a peaceful answer to the concerns legislated in the Patriot Act (Creagh, 2004). Razam argues that this piece of legislature threatened the ability for large groups to congregate in public spaces and suggests that flash mobs emerged as an expression of crowd activity that was devoid of political agitation. However he acknowledges in an interview with *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter Sunanda Creagh, that a large gathering of people, especially when identified with the label 'mob' and its unavoidably negative connotations, is inherently political.

The generation that entered adulthood at the close of the twentieth century, at times also called the September 11 generation, has been labelled as resembling a

Bohemia (that of a gypsy). New Yorkers live on the city's streets as living quarters are small and the population is very transient. The world is full of the rootless, dislocated and wandering - a true bohemian diaspora (Carr, 1993). This is the environment out of which the first flash mobs emerged. Carr's life-experience is largely that of downtown Manhattan and spates in inner Brooklyn. This geographical focus is particularly pertinent to flash mobs, as this was their birthplace. The characteristics she ascribes to the millennial generation of funky upstarts are those of a group without a tangible communal locale or a defined sense of identity within time and space. Flash mobs then can be seen as an attempt to create a sense of community and belonging, a display of ownership and citizenship within the cityscape for this otherwise disjointed collection of individuals. This provides an interesting backdrop for flash mobs and allows for inferences into the possible psyche of flash mobsters to be drawn. The urban figure is one trope that needs to be considered.

Individuals also have the power to construct their own specific meanings within and sometimes beyond the broader socio-cultural structures. Inextricably linking oneself with the identity of the city enables the inclusion of that city's identity within one's own. The cosmopolitan, funky and rebellious reputation of New York is apparently one that individuals wish to be identified with, especially, it seems, those who are not currently partaking in New York daily life. The proliferation of the flash mob from New York across the world is in some ways, the transference of a little of New York across the globe. While many participants and organisers of flash mobs globally may have little relationship with or knowledge of New York, the manifestation of a flash mob in itself possesses some essence of this city.

From the small scale to the much larger scale, the places we inhabit play key roles in one's ongoing identity formation. They operate as a stage with parameters, props, set and backdrop, within which identity is remembered, extended, practised and performed (Osborne, 2001). The geographic spaces we live in and move through and particularly the manner in which we engage with these localities, are instrumental in moulding who we are. This influence of place can also be extended to places we know about or gain a sense of through sharing with others and through research. However, it is important to acknowledge that direct experience is seen by Richins (1994) as an exceptionally key factor in the development of and ability to recall particular stories of meaning. It can be said that participation in a flash mob requires and is driven by the desire to publicly convey one's identity as a participant, long-standing or otherwise, in that specific location. By freezing, or dancing or blowing bubbles in unison flash

mobsters are actively incorporating aspects of the locale's identity within their own identity. They are building themselves as New Yorkers, Melbournians or Londoners and binding themselves to other members of that community. A visitor to Melbourne who participated in Melbourne City Council's flash mob venture Crowdplay[19], described her involvement as 'experiencing Melbourne' (Melbourne Fringe Festival, 2011).
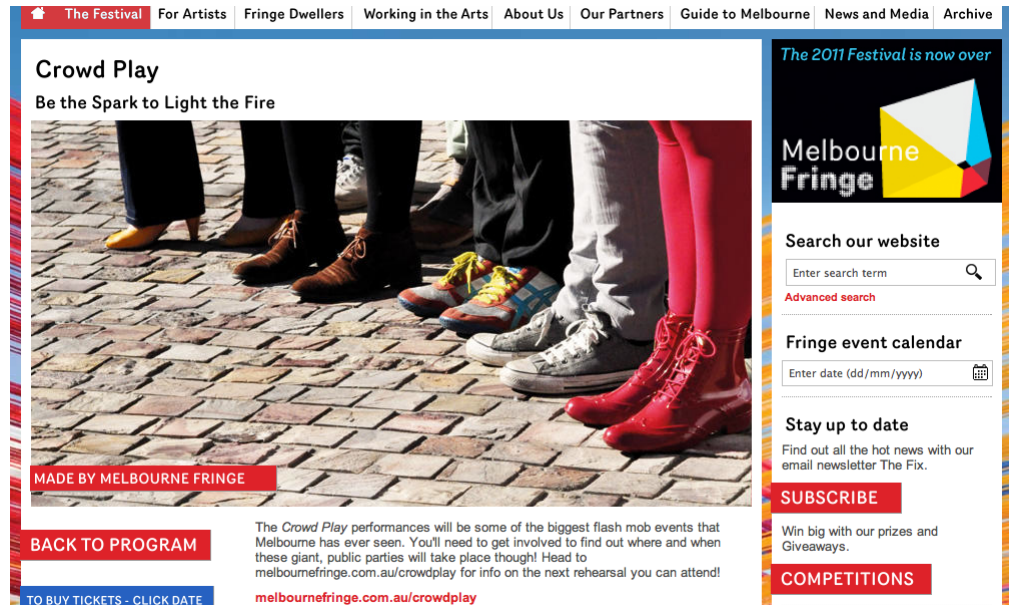

Figure 3. Screenshot of *Crowdplay* information on the Melbourne Fringe Festival (2011) website.

The need for this explicit display of membership to physical locale is perhaps not so pronounced in an environment that does not possess a transient, high tourist-flow, significant immigration profile. Those who were born and grew up in a place need not profess their belonging. In visiting or moving to a new place, accommodation of the city, town or region's identity within one's own definition of self generally requires more effort and active construction than when one is raised in that locale. Individuals in this position are more inspired and driven to 'see the sights' and experience the events widely recognised as symbolic of this new place. Chain emails, magazine articles and blog entries entitled *You know you're from Melbourne when* (You know you're from Melbourne when, 2011),

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[19] Crowdplay, organised through VicHealth's motion program as a Melbourne Fringe Festival event was 'a large scale arts project for people of all ages, sizes, types and inclinations' (Melbourne Fringe Festival, 2011). Rehearsal times to learn the choreographed dance were advertised on the Crowdplay website and at rehearsals particpants would provide their contact details. Those who had attended rehearsals were then contacted on the day of the performance with a time and location.

You're Not a Real New Yorker Until (Kurp, 2010) or *21 signs you're a Londoner* (Josefin, 2011), explain that there are qualifications and initiations that must occur before an individual can claim a residential identity. Large cities possess the critical mass necessary to have internationally recognised symbols of place and broadly understood stereotypical qualities of their residents.
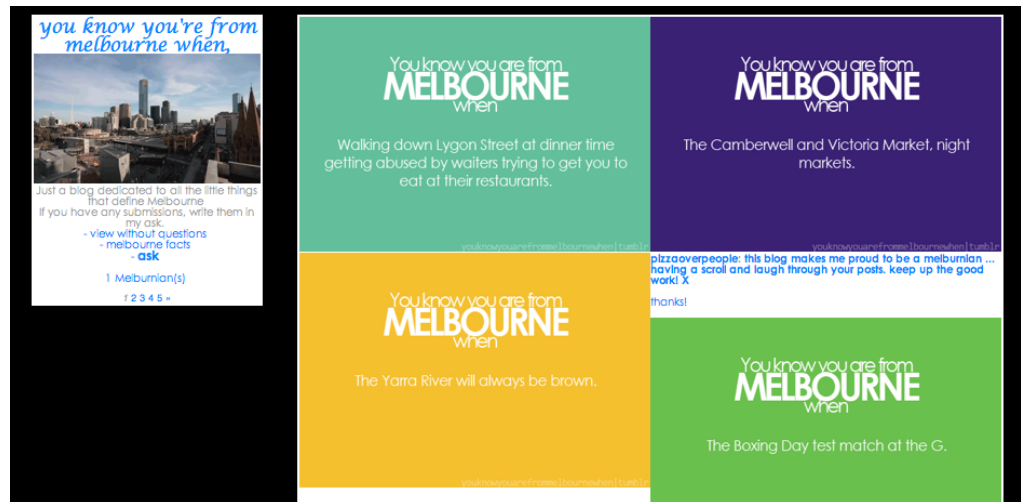

Figure 4. Screenshot of *You know you're from Melbourne when* (2011) blog.

Within ancient and indigenous cultures, place was in some ways indistinguishable from the self (Sack, 1997). While there has been evidence of a sense of loss of this relationship to place through colonisation, migration and the establishment of property ownership systems that have altered the ties between person and place, the link is still strong. To conceive of one's place within one's family, community, nation and the world, physical place is used as an elemental expression of these conceptions. In this globally mobile, digital, dynamic, fast-paced world, there is an increasing impetus on the individual to create one's own place-bound identity narrative. Definitive borderlines that demarcate the nation-hood of countries are less apparent. The identification with a homogeneous national identity is in many cases being overtaken by diasporas of individual narratives. Tourism, quite separate from the familial and habitual places and experiences inextricably tied to one's sense of identity, is often the search for distinct difference if not the exotic. The relatively recent boom in varied practices of travel and tourism enables the individual to be innovative and add entirely fresh facets to their accustomed habitual routine through novel experiences of new places that can subsequently equally function as forms of memory (Urry, 1995). A group of *Crowdplay* participants travelled from Queensland to partake in dance flash mobs in Victoria's capital city. This was an opportunity to connect with Melbourne on a

more personal and integrated level than walking the streets as a group of tourists and taking photographs.
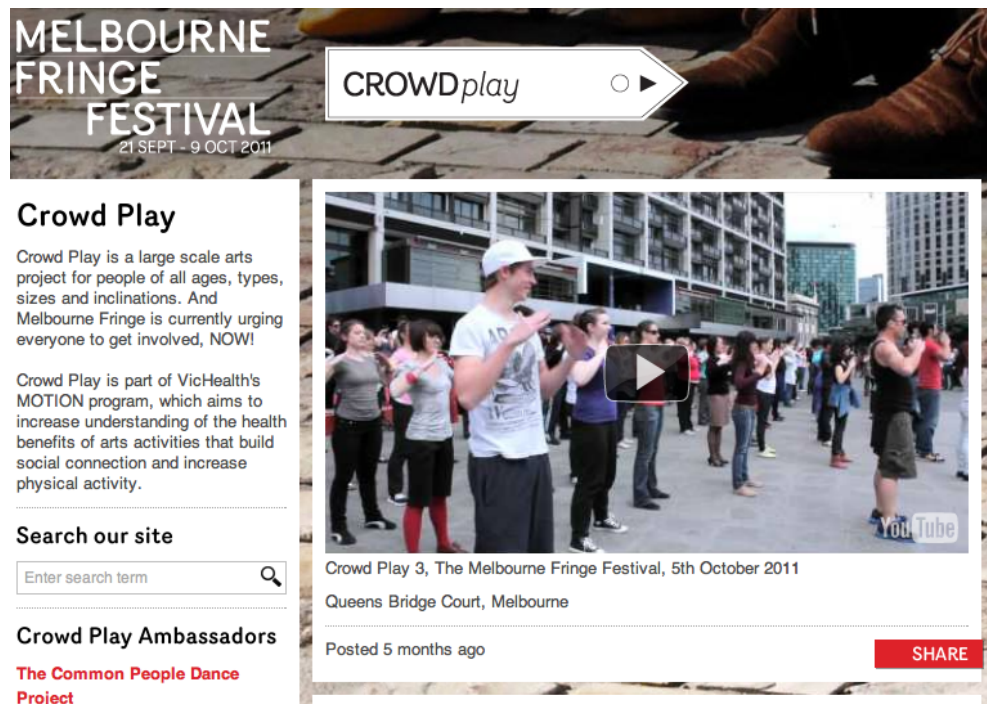

Figure 5. Screenshot of *Crowdplay* website (Melbourne Fringe Festival, 2011).

Razam likens flash mobs to the art movement and the statements a collective of individuals can make through a creative outlet (Creagh, 2004). 'Art is drawn into politics, and this is true no matter what the artist's conscious political intent' (Buck-Morss, 1991). Razam believes that the reclaiming of public space is an underlying motivation of the flash mob phenomenon. By bringing together the notion of the flash mob as public art with positive associations, he explains an eleven-minute and eleven-second silent dance party organised by *Barrel Full of Monkeys* has brought spontaneity and public access to practices that are increasingly privatised and heavily regulated. These assertions appear to support the notion of Debord's call for disruption, in a desire to reverse the corporatisation of public space in contemporary society. Following a collectively traumatic event in the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers, flash mobs express a desire to move forward in a slightly different manner. These sites of consumption played a significant role in this scholarly articulation of increasingly complex, multilateral visual culture processes. Interestingly, in a reversal of the modern urbanising process, flash mobs began within one of the first large department stores inaugurated during the modern era and has shifted into the streets. Flash mobs are the spectacular physical reclamation of public urban spaces, if only for a few minutes.

Place is not a static concept and cities do not stay the same. Flash mobs are in effect complicit with change; these events bring together those that would not ordinarily cross paths in the city. They physically alter the nature of the public space in that city (Rheingold, 2003) for the duration of their performance but also possess an impact that lingers. The effect of the flash mob endures well beyond its brief moment in time and assists to alter the understanding of physical space in the city and the manner in which people may interact with their geographical environment.

Identity is at once accumulative and enduring while also fleeting and ephemeral. Our demographic profile, the generation into which we are born and the environment in which we live influence the expression and inner understanding of identity. Aspects of the self that stay relatively secure across time are to some degree continually mediated by different experiences, changing preferences and variations in lifestyle. The distinctive narratives of place, possessions or other persons impact upon an individual's identity. However, the agency of the individual in negotiating and constructing meaning for the world around them (more closely considered in Chapter Three) should not be underestimated.

Chapter Three:

THE MEANS

'You can literally say 'turn left' and the whole group can turn left without speaking' (Creagh, 2004)

The previous chapters have discussed various historical contexts and pertinent academic literature; they have explained characteristics and considered the identity links of the flash mob. This chapter will examine the 'means' by which flash mobs are organised, constructed, and documented. Various communication tools are essential to these facets of the flash mob and therefore feature predominantly.

ORGANISATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Razam from *Barrel Full of Monkeys* confesses that flash mobs could not exist without the instantaneousness and apparent spontaneity that communication technologies support (Creagh, 2004). Here, the Internet and portable mobile devices are crucial elements in the construction of a flash mob event.

Howard Rheingold (2003) quotes Microsoft research sociologist Marc Smith as stating 'more people pooling resources in new ways' is the history of civilisation in … seven words'. This highlights the importance of examining the manner in which resources are utilised collectively. Flash mobs are the pooling of human and technological resources. Rheingold (2003) points out a shift that occurred in the early 2000s in the usage of mobile devices (namely cellular phones), first noticing this development in Tokyo in the year 2000. People were looking at their phones, not talking into them. The beginning of text messaging or 'texting' (in his words) 'led to the eruption of subcultures' (Rheingold, 2003, p. xi). Flash mobs can be considered as an event symptomatic of one of these subcultures. The ability to communicate to a large group at their individual locations, clearly and discreetly through text messaging, was essential to the advent and subsequent success of flash mob events. Rheingold (2003) used the term 'smart mob' to apply to this phenomenon. He describes that through cooperation in the use of mobile technologies a large group of people is 'able to act in concert even if they don't know each other' (2003, p. xii). People operate effectively and almost seamlessly as a collective in flash mob participation, leaving the visual impression of oneness.

Communication technology devices such as mobile phones and computers with Internet capabilities have integral roles in establishing flash mob events within the popular consciousness. These devices assist in breeding a familiarity with the concepts that surround flash mobs as well as facilitating the recognition of particular flash mob events. This spread of an understanding of the concept or idea of the flash mob can be defined as the creation of a meme[20] – the meme being the flash mob. In the era of the Internet, this trend, the spread of ideas or memes, has become particularly pronounced (Wasik, 2010). And as Rheingold (2003) predicted, the connection of the Internet to our handheld mobile devices has enormously extended the reach and speed of

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[20] Richard Dawkins coined the term meme, the self-propagating idea, in *The Selfish Gene* (1976).

dissemination of the flash mob. Individuals can spontaneously record flash mob events on their cellular phones and immediately upload the footage to self-publishing video websites.

YouTube, the quintessential self-broadcasting website, tracks and publishes the number of views over time for a selection of popular videos. This is one of the most common means by which people experience flash mobs. Examining the statistics YouTube makes available is a useful start point in discovering the trajectory of the dissemination of flash mob events across the globe in people's homes and offices as well as their mobile devices.

The graph of views from the YouTube statistics feature demonstrates the trajectory of the number of views the video of the *Grand Central Freeze* received between its upload on the 31st of January 2008 and the present day. The graph and figures show that views quickly rose to 10 million views, then slowed to a steady increase that brought the total views to approaching 30 million at the beginning of November 2011.
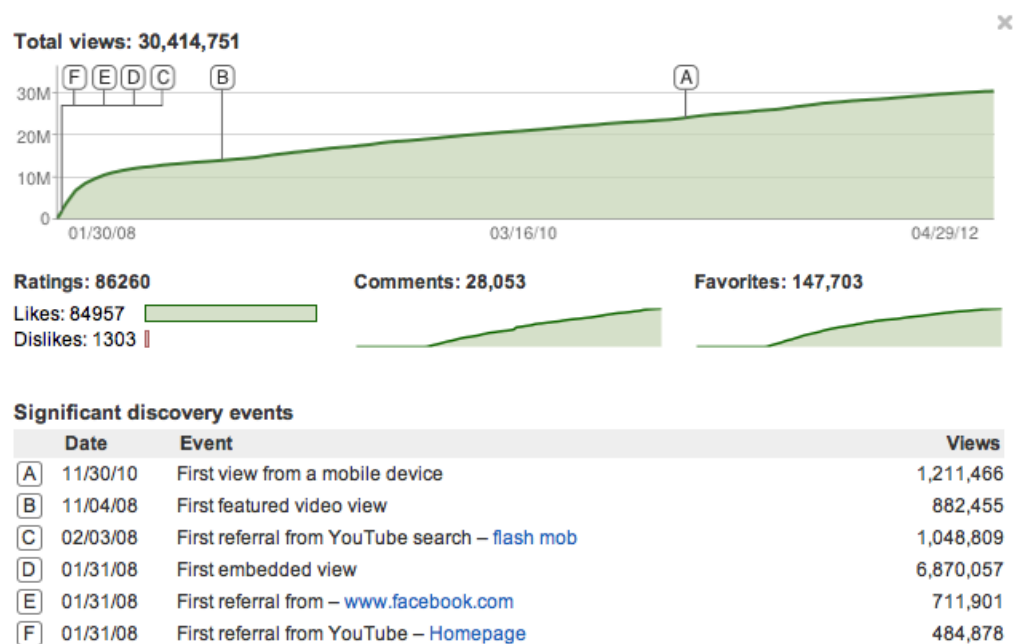

Figure 6. Screenshot of *Frozen Grand Central* statistics (Improv Everywhere, 2008).

St Patricks Day flash mob in Sydney was uploaded in March 2011. Views very quickly rose to over 500,000 and then slowed to a steady increase with two notable sharp increases. Views in March 2012 are approaching 2.5 million views.

Figure 7. Screenshot of St. Patrick's Day flash mob in Sydney (DiscoverIreland, 2011).
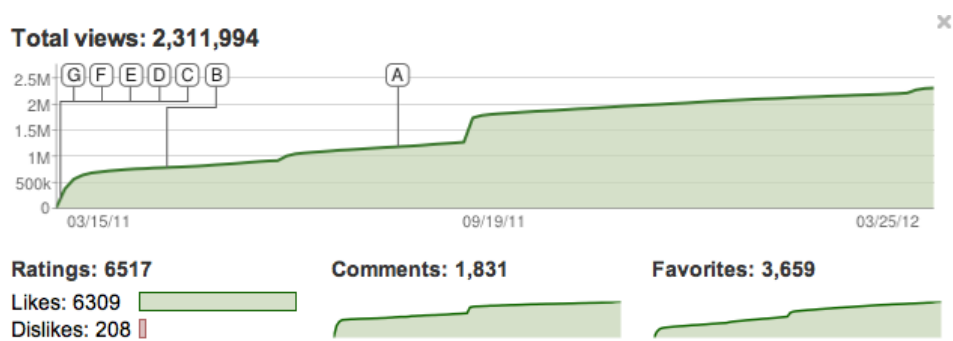

Figure 8. Screenshot of St. Patrick's Day flash mob in Sydney statistics (Discover Ireland, 2011).

Glee il flashmob in Rome was uploaded in December 23, 2009 and views initially showed a short sharp rise. Again, the rise in views then slowed to a more steady (but somewhat fluctuating) increase and then surpassed 7 million views in November 2011.

Figure 9. Screenshots of *Glee* flash mob in Rome Department store (FoxTV, 2009) and accompanying YouTube statistics.

The most popular Haka flash mob (*Flash haka @Sylvia Park*) was performed and video uploaded in September 2011 in support of the Rugby World Cup. The video experienced a very sharp rise in views to over 1 million in approximately one week. Since then viewership has shown a comparative plateau, only rising approximately 300,000 views in the following months to March 2012.

Figure 10. Screenshots of Haka Flash Mob in Auckland, NZ (Eyiboom43, 2011) and accompanying YouTube statistics.

Another popular flash mob entitled *Supermarket Flashmob*, uploaded in June 2007 also has YouTube statistics available. The number of views graph for this flash mob, instead grows in a gentler curve upwards with a notable spike in number of views occurring early 2011. *The Sound of Music* flash mob had a steady rise in viewers from its original post in March 2009 to nearly 26 million views by March 2012.
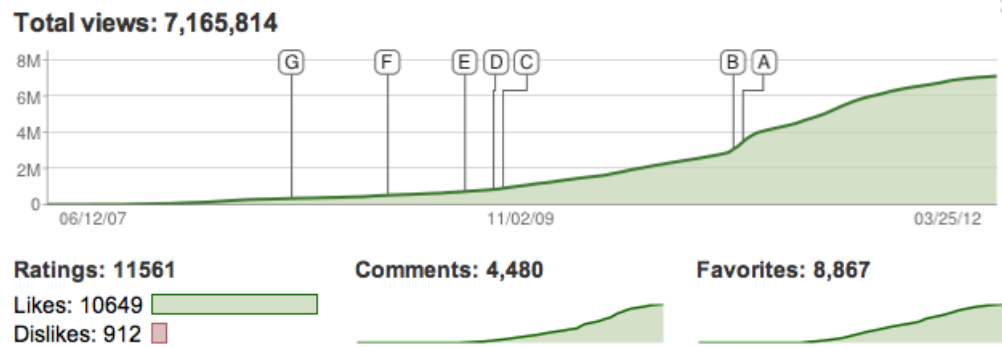
Figure 11. Screenshot of *Supermarket Flashmob* statistics (Tomcuz84, 2007).

The spread of the flash mob meme can be seen as driven by our ability to view such statistics (Wasik, 2009). We are able to place ourselves within a quantifiable trend line, see how many hits a video or website has had and where our particular downloading of the footage falls within the viewership timeline.

While there are anomalies, the general trend that these statistics appear to follow is a sharp initial rise followed by a significantly slower gradual increase. The statistics demonstrate the speed with which knowledge of flash mob events can be dispersed across the globe, the initial intrigue and popularity shown by the sharp rise in viewers - what is now colloquially referred to as 'going viral'. Bill Wasik (2009), the creator of some of the original flash mobs, calls this the 'bandwagon effect' and describes the power that search engines such as Google or YouTube's own search system have over our online actions. Their 'top ten' results create the perfect opportunity for contributing to this 'bandwagon' at any moment of any day. The Internet vastly increases our exposure to crowd behaviour and, albeit in a virtual sense, exponentially increases the 'wisdom of the crowd'[21] effect (Lanier, 2010). Wasik remarks on the irony of the fact that his mob events, devised to artificially create the bandwagon effect in an act of parody, also self-generated their own very powerful version of this effect in online viewers.

The statistical trajectory of viewership demonstrates that flash mob events quickly fade in popularity as the video appears to reach a relative saturation point. At this stage, it can be assumed another 'latest' clip takes over. It seems technology initially enables and promotes but also subsequently disables and demotes specific flash mob events. This trend can also be applied to the flash mob phenomenon as a

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[21] The wisdom of the crowd effect explains the potential intelligence of the collective (Lanier, 2010). Applied to this example, it supports the concept that the viewing preferences ranked *en masse* (in the top ten videos on Youtube), are an effective manner of accurately determining an average viewer's preference.

whole and suggests that the same mechanisms that have supported the advent of the flash mob may also be the cause of their more speedy obsolescence.

The YouTube statistics also provide some information as to the demographic of flash mob viewers. While an overrepresentation of Generation Y may be evident in flash mob participants, the viewer spectrum definitely spreads more widely to include, in particular, young teenage girls, Generation X males and females, and some baby boomers (YouTube, 2011). The Internet allows the spread of the experience and knowledge of flash mob events across the globe and across generations.

Geographically, the general trend of the spread is certainly concentrated in North America, Australasia and Western Europe. These countries also boast the highest figures for the proportion of population having access to the Internet. There are many viewers from other countries, evident in the representative maps provided by YouTube, however to a lesser extent. This emphasises the necessity of communications technologies in the 'success' of the transmission and dissemination of the flash mob as a phenomenon.

In being privy to the planning process via online discussions, viewing the event online and uploading comments to post-event forums, an exponentially larger group of people can participate in flash mob events. Participation within group activities can be achieved through engagement in the communication channels in some way attached to the event; physical presence is not necessary (Ito, 2005). Though flash mobs accentuate and celebrate physical congregation, the communication practices of contemporary society readily accept and even encourage alternative methods of involvement. Virtual communication still enables one to attain 'social network capital, knowledge capital and communion' (Smith, 1992, as cited in Rheingold, 2003). In essence this method of involvement dramatically extends one's ability to achieve these ends, as it is not reliant on place and time.

MEMORY

As flash mobs are over in a matter of minutes, it is the memories established by the individual that are largely responsible for retaining an enduring sense of the event and its meanings. Forms of memory play very significant roles in life. The fleeting nature of a flash mob event poses challenges in consolidating memories that are essential to transcend the immediate and to enable incorporation within a deeper, more enduring understanding of the world and one's role within it. The documentation of flash mobs in photographs and films (as outlined in the previous section) significantly assist in this process.

Memory has been a major area of contemporary study in a broad range of fields and is widely accepted as vital in the construction of individual identity and an awareness of self (Van Dijk, 2004). Whincup (2004) states its importance as impossible to overemphasise and the remembering of experiences through the construction of narratives is considered essential to our survival. It is the special function of being able to remember, to note consistencies, and to recall them that lies at the core of our survival and our humanity, as well as our individual identity (Whincup, 2011). While external features of place and prescribed elements of flash mobs are significantly influential (as discussed in previous chapters), the construction of narrative is not a simple nor prescribed and automatic process; 'we do not remember, we rewrite memory' (Kamper, 1997 as cited in Filser, 2003). Memory is fickle and fragile in nature (Whincup, 2011), with many aspects to its functioning.

On social anthropology Whincup (2011) writes that 'memory is of vital concern to individual and group alike' and flash mobs are a contemporary example of 'tribal' performance that stimulates the production of memory within each individual participant as well as the construction and documentation of a collective set of memories. Van Dijk (2004) presents conflicting interpretations of the relationship between individual and collective memory. He suggests that there has been a focus on individual memory as the building blocks of collective memory and that this disregards the distinctive differences 'that can be traced in every negotiation of collectivity' (p. 270). This analysis concentrates on these differences evident in forms of 'memory filtered through the prism of culture' (Van Dijk, 2004). Furthermore, the focus here is on the evocation of memory through visible and externally retrievable expressions.

Photographs have become omnipresent in the ongoing creation and recollection of memories and are described by Van Dijk (2004) as memory products (p. 4). This is however a slippery and complex phenomenon, far from static and very reflexive. Working to construct memory aims to conquer these obstacles to establish a relatively stable, understandable and clear narrative that displays a continuity of self. Tangible, retrievable stimuli such as photographs can therefore be useful aids in carrying out this challenging task.

Beyond a visual image, Edwards presents photographs as possessing a very strong material presence. They can be framed, touched, cut or hidden. However, it seems the photographs of flash mobs in large part remain in the intangible realm of the Internet or stored digitally on cameras on phones to be shared when conversation drifts to, 'what was that thing you went to in the city last week?' This manner of engaging the photographic medium is an exemplar of where material form and cultural function intersect.

The photographic medium's material form now encompasses electronic screen framed by a plastic edging, a protective cover and/or a keyboard. This aspect, especially due to its crucial role in the formation and recall of personal memory, is stipulated as being undervalued. Particularly used in the memorialisation of people, a photograph's attempt to preserve moments in time serves to assist in the construction of personal biography. Albums are emphasised as affording special opportunity to create selective and meaningful narrative (Edwards, 1999). Records from the past are made accessible for personal re-interpretation in the present and serve as cumulative resources in this understanding of the self. In the blogs, Facebook pages and forums that flash mob photographs inhabit, they can continue to be edited, commented upon, copied, pasted, cropped and referenced. This is the construction of a self-propelling amendable album, open to collective contributions. The Internet has complicated and extended the construction of the documented memory. The flash mob images and videos are subject to ongoing changes that impact upon the construction and maintenance of the memory of the event.

As well as being described as valuable aids to remembering, the photographic medium has also been labelled as an artificial mediation of memory due to the need for technological apparatus (Van Dijk, 2004). Both perspectives are presented as defensible interpretations, but whether they are 'true' accounts or not, they are undeniably attempts at reproducing very specific moments and people use them as such. Van Dijk argues that the importance of recall is in decline, superseded by

retrievable objects (such as photographs) that are carefully, even artfully constructed and enhanced, recreating the relation between self and environs. In concurrence with Van Dijk, the unprompted recall of the flash mob is not important but the manner of documentation is often markedly less exacting and more impromptu than his assertions.

Woodward (2007) cites Winnicott's theories on object interaction and the deep gratification in the play or creative space that one operates within when engaging with an object (p. 140). The imagination is employed and meaning is created. Photographs enable this creative production of elements of personal identity (Van Dijk, 2004). They are a tool used to help make sense of one's objective, subjective and ego identities.

Personal memory mnemonics, such as photographs, are integral sites of establishing and understanding one's place within a socio-cultural and economic context. Photographs share elements of personal taste and relationships with others that serve in defining oneself. The agency of the individual in this process is fervently purported by Van Dijk (2004). Personal production and collections of photographs are often described as 'autobiographical reflections of self, of family and perhaps of larger circles' (Van Dijk, 2004, p. 273). The ease with which one can alter, adorn and attempt to 'improve' this photographic record in content and presentation can be seen as testimony to the ongoing nature of this process. Meaning and accompanying narrative memory can also be altered in retrospect when experiencing the item at a later time (Filser, 2003). Van Dijk describes a fusion of lived and mediated experience that also enables intergenerational connections. There is a tendency to retrospectively view photograph collections as treasures that clearly speak to the evolution of their creators. The word 'treasure' than be interpreted in many ways. When applied to the flash mob it is not the beauty or aesthetic perfection of flash mob photographics that constitutes their treasured nature but rather the rarity and luck in stumbling upon a flash mob event as it unfolds.

It must be remembered that photographs are not objective records, nor are a singularly transparent representation of an individual's thoughts and desires. The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester and the Wigan Pier in Wigan were the chosen sites of Bagnall's (2007) study on the active versus passive nature of memory construction. The study involved a comparison of heritage consumption practices in which visitors were interviewed and asked to complete what Bagnall (2007) terms physical and emotional mapping exercises. From her findings, Bagnall (2007) concludes that people are routinely underestimated and considered too passive in their

experience of heritage sites. Data from the study supports the notion of a visitor considerably more active in the construction of their experience of the locations. Bagnall (2007) asserts that these sites provide a space for performative practices of identity expression. Through prior knowledge, personal history and individual accounts, each visitor adds to and generates new narratives in understanding their relationship to the space. Bagnall (2007) agrees with previous literature that sees contemporary society as having a distinct emphasis on self-reflection (p. 96). Visitors were selective and discerning in their use of materials and their links to personal experiences. A critique of individual choice and expression is presented that makes the reader aware of the social constructs that certainly do mould and shape the nature of individual response. The sum of these individual interpretations are also interestingly said to further inform the social constructs that then in turn impact upon the visitor. It is an intricate and non-linear cycle that highlights the complex dimensions involved in grasping the individual's understanding and utilisation of places and objects.

When considering the link to identity through the development of a narrative post-event, creations such as online public forums are an excellent source of independently instigated sharing of this process. In response to the *Frozen Grand Central* event (as with most flash mobs), hundreds of posts have been made, commenting upon the event. The official video of the event has been posted and commented upon on the Improv Everywhere website (2008). Numerous participants have chosen to comment upon their experience. Some identified themselves within the recording ('the video ends with my girlfriend and I unfreezing') and many shared a particular anecdote ('there was one rather exasperated luggage-buggy driver who must have honked at me 30 times'). Participants who posted also commented upon their emotional response to the event. Disbelief, excitement, pride, hilarity, enjoyment, accomplishment are all feelings shared in the posts (Improv Everywhere, 2008). This speaks to the emphasis, as previously mentioned, of the physical and emotional experience stimulated by flash mob participation. These reactions are aligned with the affective components of punctum.

Non-participant posts follow themes of envy in wishing they could have been there, awe and inspiration. This extends the moment of punctum even to those that had not experienced the original event and instead viewed a recording of the freeze mediated by a screen. There were also many comments complimenting the production quality of the video and Improv Everywhere as an organisation.

An interesting theme in the thread of comments is the pleasure viewers of the video have taken in hearing passersby assume that the event is 'some kind of protest' (Improv Everywhere, 2008). Enjoyment is derived from the idea that the general public instantaneously generate a desire to discover the purpose of the event and consequently produce hypotheses in explanation. While a few comments lean towards applauding a sense of social anarchy, the overwhelming majority give no impression of radicalism (Improv Everywhere, 2008). However, this pleasure taken from people's incorrect assumptions about the event's purpose does highlight a more political bent than the participant comments. These observations are derived from attitudes in general society that are extrinsic to the event itself and are remarking upon the impact of these broader expectations. The interpretation of the viewed recordings of these events has provoked reflection upon the nature of our society and provides another dimension to this analysis of the flash mob.

FLASH MOBS AND TECHNOLOGY: CONTROLLING THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

The shift to postmodern ideals that question the didactic and authoritative voice of modernistic thought has been greatly assisted and perhaps driven by the proliferation of mass communications. The comparatively idealistic meta-narrative of Modernism[22] has been expanded to include greater levels of multiplicity. Western society has shifted from newspapers, radio and magazines to a world of television, film and Internet based news and media. The flash mob is one example that expresses the manner in which we engage with communication technologies in contemporary society.

While not focussed on direct experience, a desirable feature in developing a relationship to place and in the construction of rich memories, technology is undoubtedly a key component of the flash mob phenomenon. The relationship between the participant, organiser, spontaneous audience member or post-event online viewer and the technology involved should not be accepted at face value. The relationship between individuals and technology is neither one-dimensional and static nor self-explanatory. There has been much discussion in popular media (Savage, 2003) and in scholarship (Rheingold, 2003; Lanier, 2011) regarding this interplay and applying flash mobs to this discourse is an opportunity use a specific case study to better illuminate some of its features.

A major crux of this particular analysis is the level of power an individual possesses in negotiating capitalism, in this instance through the usage of communication technologies. Rheingold (2003) predicted that major shifts in the usage of technology would not 'come from established industry leaders but from the fringes … and even associations of amateurs. *Especially* associations of amateurs' (p. xiii). Flash mobs aptly fit this definition and therefore provide ample stimulus to explore the concept that consumers can transform their role to become producers of an unplanned usage of a consumer product. Rheingold (2003) believed that 'our destiny is not (yet) determined by technology, that our freedom and quality of life do not (yet) have to be

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[22] Modernism is a term used to describe a collection of theories and schools of thought dominant between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The central ideologies include capitalism, industrialism, surveillance capacities and control of the means of violence (Giddens, 1990, as cited in Ritzer, 2008). It involved the rise of the nation state and provided prescribed means by which to cause and direct societal progress (Giddens, 1990, as cited in Ritzer, 2008).

sacrificed to make us into more efficient components of a global wealth-generating machine.' Are flash mobs evidence for the continuation of this belief?

As discussed in Chapter Two, Debord regards the spectacle as an omnipresent indivisible fusion of production and consumption. This is synonymous with the Frankfurt School's 'culture industry' and the 'production of consumption' (de Gay et al, 1997). Flash mob events and accompanying documentation or other paraphernalia would inevitably be considered commodities according to Debord and scholars of the Frankfurt School. And the 'culture industry' denies the possibility of an individualised commodity aesthetic (Crouch, 1999, p. 105). Flash mobs within this model are a part of this commodity aesthetic. Differentiation within visual stimuli is purported by Adorno to exist only in order to ensure that all of an individual's consumer desires are met. Evidence for Marxist interpretations, initially rooted in the mid-nineteenth century, is ever-present and the source of constant debate in current academia. However, Crouch (1999) centres the cause for Adorno's anxiety over mass entertainment on the large corporations with multiple economic interests that control visual media (p. 107). The flash mob in its original form could therefore sit outside Adorno's criticism, as they are not produced, recorded or distributed by business, big or small.

Flash mobs, as discussed previously, clearly have historical links to the art realm and have been professed by event organisers as possessing many of the motivations and elements of art process and creative practice (S. Lake, October 12, 2011). However, flash mobs are seldom defined or directly referred to as art in publications. When questioned about the status of flash mobs as art, Stephanie Lake (October 12, 2011) a Melbourne dance flash mob organiser stated that she clearly understood these events as constituting a form of art. Her position as a professional choreographer for the dance company *Chunky Move* places her firmly within this world, and she is therefore perhaps more comfortable in recognising or claiming such events as artistic expression. The flash mob can be considered as an example of art transcending its hermetic world and entering broader society. This parallels recent debates on the industry of fine arts now operating within the fields of fashion and entertainment (Buskirk, 2012).

A flash mob seeks to operate outside what the Frankfurt School considered to be an insidious and almost inescapable economic system. They celebrate the labour force in the process of production as the masses exercise the ability to make production choices. Flash mobs do not require people to spend beyond their means and do not directly necessitate the purchase of particular items. Flash mobs do

possess elements of commodity as they are an outgrowth of the use of communications products and these technologies also allow people to 'consume' the events. However, they also operate outside the usual boundaries of capitalist consumerism. Flash mobs are enabled by and function within the capitalist consumerist realm but push the edges of what has been asserted as a very rigid system. In engaging with flash mobs, technology has been utilised for an unusual purpose – commercial products are employed to create an event intended to reside outside the capitalist system. Flash mobs allow us to view consumerism as not necessarily inherently 'bad' and support the idea that there is freedom to move, if not outside, then sideways from corporation-driven consumptive practices.

Alternatively, Jean Beaudrillard professes 'public and private cultural space has vanished in an oversaturation of meaningless communication' (Crouch, 1999, p. 169-70). Contemporary philosopher and computer scientist Jaron Lanier[23] also presents a rather pessimistic view of the options and autonomy available to individuals via communications technologies, namely the Internet. He believes that the proliferation of template sites, especially those intended to provide outlets for individual expression (sites like Facebook or MySpace) actually disencourage and even destroy this goal. Contemporary technologies enable the relatively easy adjustment of commodities in order to meet the needs of smaller niche markets. This gives mass produced items the impression of personalisation (Foster, 2002).

Foster describes product design as directed at creating this individualised illusion and people's response by using these items to build their identity. Particular design styles, additions and amendments are chosen based on whether they match the individual's perception of themselves and their preferences. 'Design can give "style" to our "character"' (Foster, 2002, p. 25). This phenomenon can be seen as providing semi-autonomous control of consumption but is also a means to firmly embed people further within consumerism. The means of production of the platform for communication and expression via the Internet remains in the hands of the expert programmers and subject to the directives of software giants, Microsoft and Apple and dominant online applications, Google and Facebook. Lanier is also very wary of the potential of the mob and envisages and describes the disastrous violent potential of mobs. He sees this as a product of de-emphasising the individual and the removal of human essence. He

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[23] Jaron Lanier is a computer scientist and philosopher who coined the term 'virtual reality' and has spent many years analysing and publishing commentary on the 'transformative power of modern technology' (Lanier, 2011). Some of his closest professional ties are with UC Berkeley and Microsoft.

does provide 'tips' to combat this trend by focussing on developing an online presence that is very considered, subjective and personalised.

Flash mobs utilise technology to create something that in many ways completely opposes Lanier's advice. Flash mobs require participants to relinquish individuality and embrace the collective. The phenomenon is intended to speak for itself without individual narrative or openly articulated personal meaning. Ascribing meaning is largely avoided by definition (OED, 2008). Despite the emphasis on the collective, devoid of explicit purpose, participants describe a sense of personal freedom, achievement and internal joy through their involvement. In addition, the flash mob is the antonym of the 'angry mob' that Lanier fears and instead epitomises a 'happy mob'.

Beaudrillard's theory of 'lack' and continual and inevitable dissatisfaction with consumables is one explanation for our accumulation of products (Woodward, 2007, p. 141). McCracken's 'displaced meaning' and Campbell's theories are of similar vein and address this same tendency to dream and hope. The purchase and use of an object may temporarily fulfil these expectations but this feeling dissipates, thus leaving a hole and beginning again 'the cycle of longing and desire' (Woodward, 2007, p. 142). Following the fundamental assertion that establishing and maintaining a sense of identity is an essential component of the human condition, attributing such meaning and purpose to consumptive items in capitalist societies is a logical solution.

The spread of capitalism originally stimulated interest in developing broad social theories but then also triggered a transformation and recognition of the individual identification with material items (Woodward, 2007, p. 23). Class based and largely negative Marxist discourse around consumerism and the opposing very positive perception of consumption as an opportunity for liberation, are presented as both having stemmed from developments of interpretations that critically consider individual desire and fulfilment (Woodward, 2007, p. 141). Woodward contends that the desire to definitively establish consumerism as either 'good' or 'bad' has resulted in reductive analyses that have failed to address the complexities of this process (Woodward, 2007). Instead of focussing on the debates surrounding the merits and downfalls of consumer capitalism it is more useful to consider the degree and methods by which individuals can assert their identity within this economic system.

Lash and Urry (1994) assert that contemporary society is seen by many as a realm where the construction of self-identity is not tightly bound by constraints of class, family or vocation. This construction largely consists of combining consumer choices to

continually assemble and re-assemble a self, satisfactory to one's own tastes. This aligns with the theory that a commodity's major role is that of signifier - the function is secondary to the expressive value (Woodward, 2007, p. 136).

A major factor in the ability of consumers to become producers is the significantly reduced cost of producing mobile devices, especially the added affordability that mobile usage of the Internet has provided. It has enabled more people to pool more resources in novel ways (Smith, 2002, as cited in Rheingold, 2003). At an affordable price, any individual can possess the means to distribute, record and upload information to the Internet. Rheingold (2003) uses the analogy that the mobile phone is to the Internet what the telephone was to the telegraph. The power of production is no longer outside the reach of an individual consumer's financial means. This democratisation of power fosters the advent of new and unique uses for mobile devices as it allows opportunity for the 'wisdom of the crowd' (Lanier, 2011) to be utilised. The Internet is untethered (Standage, 2001), a state that flash mobs exemplify.

Groups such as Improv Everywhere have increasingly formalised flash mob events. Organisations or Facebook group names are becoming common knowledge among social media users and this has increased the ability to access flash mob organisational information as well as decreasing the mystique that surrounds flash mobs. The initial founders of these flash mob organisations then enrol further organisers, crew and participants as their movement becomes more established. Spectators consume their product, ostensibly for free, although flash mob events obviously promote the usage of communications goods that support the use of video recording and web streaming.

Many 'how to organise' instructions have a significant emphasis on the promotion of events (Adelaide Flash Mob, 2011). Once secretive and possessing a certain level of mystique, flash mobs are quickly becoming mainstream. It seems that what began as almost a clandestine activity is now a very open and inclusive affair. Organisers write out and distribute very clear instructions to participants. While there is often room for some creative freedom, boundaries are well defined. Organisers generally appoint official videographers to document the event, edit and post an official version on the group website. While events are often group collaborations, it seems that most organisations have a sole appointed head organiser or Event Champion as named by the Adelaide Flash Mob group to ensure that the necessary steps to guarantee success are accomplished. A movement that appears populous and relies on the cooperation of large groups to succeed relies on the same CEO approach as

the corporate world decisions for the many being made by the few (or even one).

Ostrom[24] (1990) outlined conditions under which group activity thrives. While her case studies explored quite different usages of public property, it is still pertinent to note the findings of Ostrom's research. The following list provides a platform from which to examine the flash mobs' successful sharing of a) the public space in which a flash mob is to be enacted and b) the conduct surrounding the flash mob concept, which can be envisaged as a CPR – a common pool resource (Ostrom, 1990). The flash mob can be seen as an entity that many can contribute to or draw from and hopefully avoid its exhaustion.

Successful groups were marked by the following design principles:

- Group boundaries are clearly defined.
- Rules governing the use of collective goods are well matched to local needs and conditions.
- Most individuals affected by these rules can participate in modifying the rules.
- The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities.
- A system for monitoring members' behaviour exists; the community members themselves undertake this monitoring.
- A graduated system of sanctions is used.
- Community members have access to low-cost conflict resolution mechanisms.
- For CPRs that are part of larger systems, appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organised in multiple layers of nested enterprises (Ostrom, 1990, p. 90).

As Hardin later stated, it is the 'unmanaged commons' that cause the 'tragedy' (Ridley, 1996). Organisations involved in flash mob events that have become world renowned, such as Improv Everywhere certainly meet some of the above criteria. The

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[24] Elinor Ostrom's research, published in 1990, explored the 'tragedy of the commons' theory. Her case studies involved examining the sharing of forestry resources in Japan, grazing land in Sweden and irrigation processes in Spain and the Philippines (Rheingold, 2003, p. 35). In these instances people had successfully shared common resources for centuries without depleting those resources.

group protocol and parameters for communication are clearly defined in such organisations, as in the first of Ostrom's principles. However, it seems that these very successful organisations and flash mobs that hold similar prestige are not characterised by the same level of democratisation as Ostrom (1990) outlines. It is perhaps due to the very large and disjointed nature of participant groups that would make the input of all participants unworkable. To create a successful flash mob, participants must be willing to follow the very clear instructions of a largely autonomous leader. While anyone is free to make suggestions for flash mob ideas, it is the clear and defined instructions for the event emanating from one uncomplicated source that enable success.

The means of flash mob success, it seems, are also a significant contributor to its loss of power and perhaps to its ultimate demise. If success equates to achieving a widespread level of awareness, technology has ensured the success of the flash mob. Communication devices are also essential in the initial creation process. However, as the proliferation of views via the Internet raises the general awareness of flash mobs, the element of surprise is (inevitably and) simultaneously destroyed.

Chapter Four:

TRANSFORMATION

'A *flash mob* can be a gathering of complete strangers performing a pointless act and dispersing, as well as a group of unruly teens who gather to wreak mayhem and perform robberies' (Shea, 2012)

KONY2012 is a documentary that swept across the globe early in March 2012. After being uploaded on the 5th of March 2012, the video subsequently received over 80 million views in two weeks. It is a documentary that hopes to make Joseph Kony (a rebel army leader in Central Africa) world famous for his crimes against humanity. In doing this, the movement behind the documentary aims to achieve Kony's arrest by the end of 2012. The documentary closes with an action plan involving a worldwide flash mob event that took place overnight on April 20th, 2012. On this night, the documentary instructed, groups should plaster their cities with banner, posters and slogans in support of the 2012 campaign. It was flash mob planned on a scale not previously seen, aimed at achieving a new level of promotion from a very specific action.

However, the success of this global politically activist flash mob has been presented as dubious by initial news reports. While some articles did not allude to any shortcomings in the strength of the reaction to *Invisible Children's* request (Fry, 2012), many others described the coverage of the world's cities in posters of Joseph Kony as disappointingly lacklustre (Trujillo, 2012, Carroll, 2012).

This event did not maintain the sense of the unexpected that is central to the definition of the flash mob as it was reported and advertised generously on a global scale prior to the event (Fry, 2012). It appears that the very wide proliferation of the documentary and the speedy and vehement backlash in response to *KONY2012* (Trujillo, 2012) brought about a different sort of notoriety, unrelated to the planned flash mob event. Despite these developments, *KONY2012* did present an unprecedented and unexpected shift in the scale of the flash mob. Flash mobs continue to shift and change beyond the scope of the accepted definition of the term, ever-expanding ways to characterise this phenomenon (White, 2006).

Over the last two years the flash mob phenomenon has exhibited significant transformation and has been linked to many events in world news. In some senses what has come to exemplify this thesis' working definition of the flash mob is just as dissimilar from the social experiments of Bill Wasik and followers as the more recent flash mob expressions. Like all social phenomena, it is more accurate to view the flash mob on a dynamic continuum. Commentaries can then be made on this changing timeline of events without making judgement as to whether exclude or include various events within the flash mob collective. This chapter will consider links of the flash mob that have been made by the media to flash robberies, the Libyan, Egyptian and London

riots and the *Occupy* flash mobs. To begin it is equally prudent to explore more innocuous developments under the flash mob banner.

RELAXING THE RULES

The 11/11/11 commemorative celebrations and such events as World Pillow Fight day denote a general trend to incorporate events that span over a wider length of time and take place more than once within the concept of the flash mob. These events bear similarities to more usual community events that are commonplace in villages, town and cities across the globe and have been for centuries. The use of the term 'flash mob' in reference to these events does perhaps serve to remove the point of difference from more generally categorised community events that take place every day.

Recent events that have been tagged as flash mobs in popular media have also damaged the positive public opinion of flash mobs established by such events as *Frozen Grand Central*. However, it is reasonable to conclude that freeze flash mobs and others closely aligned with the widely accepted definition of the term, will continue to be strongly associated with 'flash mob' in people's minds. The resonance of freeze and dance flash mob events has further been assisted through YouTube and the display of flash mobs in popular situation comedies and romantic comedy films.

While successful flash mob events have attracted significant attention, it is interesting to ponder those that have not. One flash mob event that I attended on October 14th, 2011 in Melbourne that quite clearly was not a success was an event organised through the Melbourne Flash Mob group. The intention was to form a vehicle around unsuspecting passersby by twirling umbrellas as if they were wheels. The 200 confirmed participants were depleted to an unimpressive 6 participants, minus a few more who strolled by with umbrellas (on a sunny day) and, it seemed, also opted out upon seeing the lack of a crowd.

Numerous reasons can be suggested for the failure of this event. I consider that there were several key contributing factors in comparison to more successful events, both in Melbourne and further afield. This event crossed into the realm of performance art that resembled the Happenings of the 1960s. Its premise was quite experimental in nature and therefore potentially threatening to would-be participants. Participation required an overt interaction with the general public instead of maintaining the oblivious quality to the surrounding public that flash mobs often involve. It was necessary to approach individual members of the public and sustain an interaction with each person while twirling your umbrella alongside them as they walked.

Secondly, for a relatively involved task, there was no prior preparation. In contemplating the factors that encourage participants to attend rehearsal sessions for a flash mob, the enjoyment of the rehearsal in itself could also be a significant factor. Flash mobs that require preparation are often dances to music, an activity that holds a much greater social acceptability and wide agreement in its level of enjoyment than experimental theatre or the actual act of twirling umbrellas against people's legs.

The legitimate nature of the group is also an important variable to examine. This same group was the organiser of a blowing bubbles flash mob in a shopping centre very nearby a few months previous in which hundreds of individuals attended (Melbourne Flash Mob, 2011; OnlyMelbourne, 2011). What makes the bubble-blowing concept inherently more appealing than this flash mob attempt is certainly subjective but answers are found in social acceptability, immediate enjoyment factors and actions that are more visually arresting.

2012 will mark the fifth year of World Pillow Fight Day, now held in dozens of cities around the globe. I attended the Melbourne event in April 2011 to directly experience and document the pillow fight.

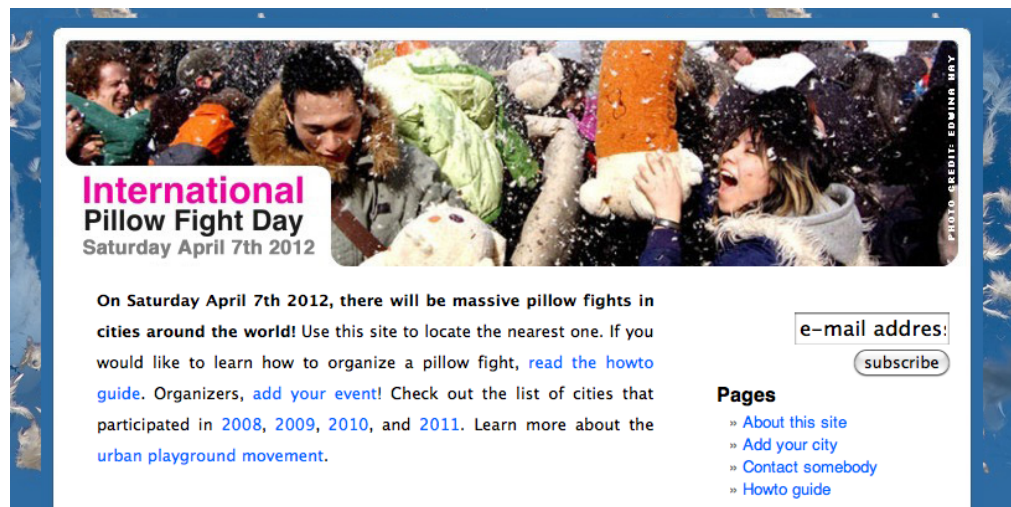Figure 12. International Pillow Fight Day, Melbourne, 2011.

Figure 13. Screenshot of International Pillow Fight Day website (2012).

This event had been described many times by media sources as a flash mob (Urbina, 2010). However, upon attendance there were many, many aspects that did not adhere to *A Flashmob Manifesto* (Aglomerarispontane, 2004). Participants and observers obviously gathered in the location well prior to the start time. Milling around, pillows at the ready, individuals (many in fancy dress) chatted in their own groups. The beginning of the event was instigated by a countdown that was announced by one individual, presumably an organiser. There was also a request to stay behind to clean up the mess of feathers prior to giving the green light to go ahead. Then ensued a pillow fight between the approximately 100 people in earnest. The pillow fight continued for approximately 20 minutes with no clear ending, participants dropping out as they saw fit. Even after 20 minutes there were still a few pillow-fight enthusiasts, some on roller-skates, that were ardently pillow-fighting. There were at least as many spectators as there were participants, cameras at the ready. The crashing and clashing of pillows with other pillows and various body parts between friends and strangers were captured by dozens of amateur photographers and videographers that encircled the participants as feathers flew around and eventually littered the pillow-fight arena floor.

Melbourne, Australia

Time: Saturday, May 7th, 5.00pm
Location: Carlton Gardens
Host: This City Lives
Website: This City Lives – Coming Soon!
Facebook Event

This entry was posted on Friday, January 21st, 2011 at 5:11 am and is filed under 2011. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

3 Responses to "Melbourne, Australia"

Leith says:
March 21, 2011 at 12:42 am

any word yet "this city lives?

Figure 14. Screenshot of Melbourne International World Pillow Fight Day (2011) website.

The intention here is not to criticise the event for its anomalies, nor admonish the journalists that have so often referred to the event as a flash mob. The purpose of this case study is to document the characteristics of a now annual, recognised and celebrated event that has been widely acclaimed within the flash mob realm. Does it matter that the event does not fit the strict guidelines of *A Flashmob Manifesto* (Aglomerarispontane, 2004)? Participants gathered prior to the event, arrived in groups and openly communicated with one another. The event also long exceeded the ten-minute time limit. It can be asserted that these breaches dilute and undermine the integrity of a phenomenon that aims to promote a true sense of spontaneity.

One can mourn the loss of spontaneous interaction with members of our communities at every turn. No longer is it acceptable to appear unannounced on your neighbour's doorstep, and larger casual community gatherings no longer seem to exist.

Our world is scheduled and timelined, gatherings are given titles, causes and sponsors, and food and beverages can be bought from stalls with franchise banners pinned above. *World Pillow Fight Day* has a rather comprehensive website, www.pillowfightday.com, where events are posted and images and comments from the event can be uploaded and then archived.

Figure 15. International Pillow Fight Day, Melbourne, 2011.

This particular event has also elicited many negative responses. In some cases, pillow fight flash mobs have been banned in certain municipalities. In San Francisco for example, following a St. Valentines Day flash mob in 2009, a ban was proposed in response to the $20,000 cleanup bill caused by the massive amount of errant feathers that were left behind (Burkeman, 2009). Events such as *World Pillow Fight Day* that last for hours and leave behind a noticeable trail of debris have provided understandable fuel for those opposed to flash mobs.

PROMOTIONAL FLASH MOBS

Further case studies exemplify the appropriation of the flash mob for commercial enterprise. Chapter Two discussed the power that flash mobs gave to consumers to become producers and suggested the possibility of exhibiting agency in the negotiation of this consumerist culture, flash mobs have predictably been used for direct commercial gain. Large corporations have seized upon the opportunity flash mobs provide to capture audience attention in order to sell their products. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the telecommunications company T-mobile has had great success with their flash mob-focussed advertising campaign. Their staging of a flash mob in Liverpool Street station at the close of 2011 has received upwards of 30 million views on YouTube. Interestingly, uploading to YouTube was the sole means by which T-mobile chose to distribute their flash mob creation. You can also view 'making of' the advertisement footage on YouTube to learn how the flash mob dance was created.

The company advertised for people who were keen dancers, not professional dancers, but simply people who enjoyed dancing. They auditioned and chose what they considered to be a full spectrum of participants in an attempt to give the impression of random and spontaneous involvement by any manner of individual. Participants were instructed to dress in different ways to further enhance this goal. They placed hidden cameras around the station and set up a production room to view the footage as it unfolded. The flash mob was a visual extravaganza and the official film of the event is second to none. But of course this was an advertising campaign and has been openly criticised on forums and other popular media for breaching an essential component of the flash mob – that they should not be used as promotion (Aglomerarispontane. 2004, Adelaide Flash Mob, 2011).
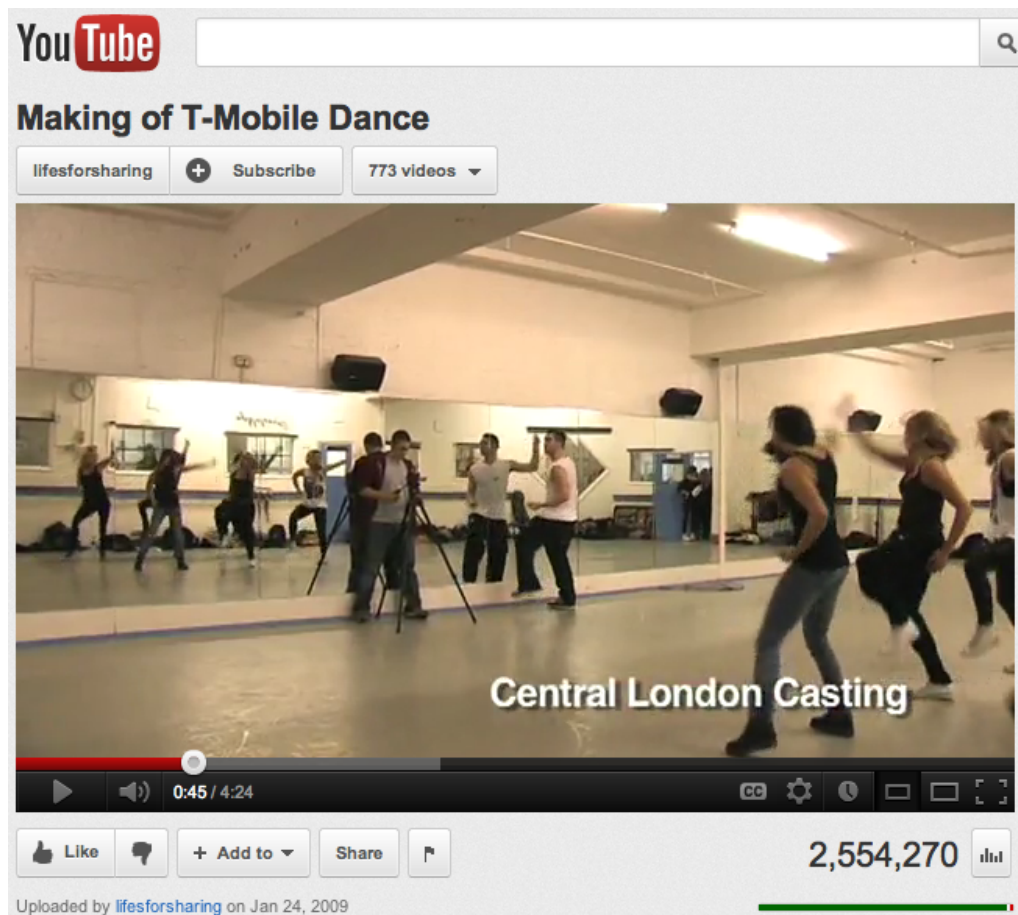
Figure 16. Screenshot of the making of the T-mobile flash mob dance commercial in Liverpool St. Station, London (Lifesforsharing, 2009).

Another very well-viewed major advertising campaign was *The Sound of Music* flash mob in Antwerp train station that employed similar recruitment and organisation methods created to promote an upcoming television series in which they wanted to find a new Maria for *The Sound of Music* stage production.

Figure 17. Screenshot of *The Sound of Music* television advertisement flash mob in Antwerp Station, Belgium (saihttam1988, 2009).

This elaborate dance flash mob had received 25 million views by December 2011 following its YouTube upload in March 2009. In Australia, councils and community groups promoting the Melbourne summer festival and the Sydney Mardi Gras have created flash mobs.

While many critics have proclaimed that promotional events should be precluded from being termed flash mobs, this is perhaps a restrictive perspective. These events clearly display many of the features of the flash mob and it is useful to note these similarities as well as to explore the differences from the OED (2008) definition of the flash mob.

Figure 18. Bondi Beach flash mob promoting the Sydney Mardi Gras (RockYourBox, 2009).

Similarly there are numerous flash mobs that have been created to promote particular causes, whether in protest or *memoriam*. Michael Jackson tribute flash mobs, most commonly to the tune *Beat It*, swept across the globe following his death. From Helsinki to Los Angeles, Paris to Singapore, people dressed in bright colours gathered to dance their memorial dedication. *Glee* flash mobs have been a particularly popular theme. Fans have created these events in literal tribute to the dance-musical format of the show. Causes such as climate change have also been the subject of innumerable flash mob events, such as an example that took place on the Sydney Opera House steps in which participants wore matching t-shirts and hard hats.

Figure 19. Screenshot of *Power Shift* flash mob aimed at raising awareness for global warming (EMC Communications, 2009).

The date 11.11.11 inspired many to participate in collective events across the globe, many of which can be linked to the flash mob. Professor Alan Lenzi is quoted as stating 'numbers that are already significant to us, such as calendar dates that also coincidentally fall into an obvious pattern, become doubly significant. 11.11.11 is another example of people doing what people are cognitively prone to do - find significance' (Kwek, 2011). Individuals find things to commemorate, to take meaning from. People, it can be said, are 'meaning-making machines'. An event that took place on this date in Melbourne in Federation Square was a group meditation. The instruction for the meditation was to sit down and meditate when the clock struck 11.11am. A group of approximately 20 individuals gathered in a circle and carried out the meditation together while a number of other individuals carried out their own solo meditation at other locations around the square. I participated in this meditation seated in the main square, legs folded, and somewhat uncertain as to who else were participants. Quite different from the nature of many flash mobs that celebrate movement, these group meditations paid tribute to the quality of pause in our busy everyday environment. It was a subtle, unobtrusive expression of the flash mob. There

was a definite sentiment behind this flash meditation and this purpose is explained on the MedMob (2012) website and their worldwide city-based Facebook groups. This date is a date of remembrance and the meditations that took place around the globe were entered into in the name of this remembrance and in the interests of peace and understanding.

Figure 20. Screenshot of MedMob (2012) website.

Recently, a new company called 11Project in Sydney advertised for an intern to act as a Flash Mob Organiser for the promotion of their organisation (The Loop, 2011). Conversely, an organiser of the Adelaide Flash Mob group has repeatedly declined requests from various organisations to coordinate flash mobs to support their causes. While the flash mob events detailed above go against the principles of the causeless, non-commercial original flash mob, other key aspects remain evident. Surprising the passersby in a manner that invokes joy in the audience and participants, remains a key component of the case-studied events.

FLASH MOBS AND CONFLICT

2011 saw the introduction and steady increase in coverage on flash mob robberies, particularly in the USA. This is the manifestation of the dangerous potential of the mob that Lanier warned of in *You are Not a Gadget*, 2011. Throughout history, mobs have been involved in criminal activities - it is a feature that was in some ways synonymous with the title 'mob' prior to the advent of the much more benign and whimsical flash mob. Events termed 'flash robberies' involve a large number of youths apparently spontaneously converging on a store, location and time coordinated and disseminated via mobile communication technology, and simultaneously shoplifting a large amount of small retail items and then quickly dispersing.

'Deindividuation' is a key term within social psychology that describes the tendency of individuals to act as they otherwise would not while they are part of a large group (Postmes, 2001). This is commonly called a 'mob mentality'. The comfort people find in being involved in a group event can extend to the involvement in criminal activity. Initially, flash mobs provided a more positive connotation to the 'mob' than is usual. Flash robberies are instead aligned with common conceptions of the term. The key similarity between these and the benign flash freeze or a whimsical dance flash mob is their organisation through mobile communication technologies. These technologies provide an easy means to arrange the congregation and collective action of a large group of people, whether for good or for wrong-doing.

Other events that have been linked to flash mobs were the August 2011 flash mob riots in London that became a feature in world news. The London riots were a widespread series of acts of vandalism and violence across the city, largely instigated and arranged via BlackBerry mobile phone messaging systems. They began in Tottenham on the evening of the 6th of August and spread throughout the greater metropolitan area and to some other English cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester for a week (Tonkin, 2012). It is widely believed that a police shooting of a youth initially sparked the riots, but their exponential and progressive spread had little in association with the initial protest. It seems that the focus on the use of these mobile communication devices to plan and execute these acts led to their label as flash mob riots. However, it is simplistic to blame the advent of these media technologies for the occurrence of the events in London, as many have done (Tarkowski, Fathy and

Melyantsou, 2011). This is an example of the underestimation of human agency in negotiating objects as described in Chapter One.

Marxist theory suggests that the creation of a capitalist society in which the population is positioned to aspire to the accumulation of consumer items inevitably leads to a class uprising of those that are unable to attain the items necessary to achieve a satisfiable social status. The creation of an underclass is an eventuality of a rampant and unabated capitalist society. Communication technologies provided the format and shaped the nature of the London riots in this instance, the cause is much more insidious.

Movements of political activism such as the 'internet revolutions' of Northern Africa during 2011 were also widely tagged as flash mobs within popular media. On a scale far beyond the flash robberies in the US and even the riots in the UK, these riots were also not quickly or relatively peacefully quelled – particularly in the case of Libya. These events, most notably in Egypt and Libya have not received the same scorn and disgust as flash robberies or the London riots in Western media. This is perhaps understandable as these riots were pro-democratic and in vehement protest against the dictatorial regimes of Gaddafi and Mubarak respectively. The *en masse* efforts of the young adult population of these nations have been heralded as brave and revolutionary. Their goals to remove their leaders from their positions of power were made very clear via spokespeople, banners, comments and general consensus. These efforts have been widely considered as significantly more noble and commendable than shoplifting and vandalising without any clear message.

Rheingold (2003) describes in detail the first instance of a 'smart mob' effecting the fall of a head of state. The Philippines was the nation and President Joseph Estrada was the leader in question. Over one million Manila residents, coordinated via text messages, congregated at the *People Power* monument (Rheingold, 2003, p. 157). This was the site of the peaceful demonstrations that had eventually ousted the Marcos regime in 1986. The instruction was to arrive at Epifanio de los Santa Avenue wearing black and over the following four days over one million Filipinos did just that. Estrada was forced to step down. As Rheingold (2003) points out, other protests such as those at the 1999 WTO conference in Seattle used similar methods, but the incident in the Philippines was of a new magnitude. Filipinos were very early adopters of text messaging following a sales promotion in 1995 and having remained inexpensive thereafter (Rheingold, 2003, p. 158). The use of the cellular phone in this manner allowed citizens to transcend the failing physical infrastructure of the developing nation

in which they resided. The events in Northern Africa in 2011 are the most recent examples of a similar magnitude. Unfortunately, these instances involved high levels of force and resistance and sometimes have degenerated into civil war.

The *Occupy* movement that began on Wall Street in New York City in October 2011 is a protest movement that quickly spread worldwide, which seeks to point out the inequalities evident in Western society. Their catch-cries involve highlighting the amount of power that 1% of the population hold over the remaining 99%. This relates to key positions within politics and the corporate world and the corresponding high incomes that this small proportion earn in comparison to the vast majority. This movement perhaps articulates some underlying causes of the flash robberies and London riots. Originally expressed through lengthy sit-in protests, *Occupy* has diversified to include flash mob protests as well as other more flash-mob-type activities such as flash dances both in public squares as well as on the doorsteps of corporate offices and houses about to be reclaimed by banks.

As noted, communication technologies have provided a means to arrange and express collective action. Whether or not flash mobs communicate a specific purpose, their level of significance as a collective communication is not impacted upon. It is not necessary to provide a caption for people to smile at a flash mob freeze or bop along with a flash mob dance. Likewise it is not necessary to have an accompanying script to understand that the London riots communicate that participants are less than content – entitled or not, right or wrong. The widespread large scale looting that occurred during these riots in many senses starkly reflects the pressures of the consumer-based society we live in.

The flash mob has spread far and wide and the term has been used very liberally within the popular media. The loosening of the bounds of the flash mob has seen these events move further outside the definition as provided by the OED (2008). Flash mob notifications are widely circulated, their beginnings and ends stretching well beyond 'sudden' and 'brief'. Flash mobs inevitably have been employed for promotion and advertising of both community groups and commercial enterprise. In a more ominous vein, the term has also been used to describe a wide spectrum of criminal activities and violent political uprisings. To grasp for the true or correct and unchanging definition of the flash mob is futile. Society, as individuals and collectives, will employ terminology as it sees fit. Wasik's mob events of 2003 are virtually unrecognisable in the dance flash mobs so popular in television programs and YouTube viewership today. It is not unlikely that these particularly recent expressions of the flash mob will

soon be superseded and similarly unrecognisable in the near future. The term 'flash mob' is quickly becoming synonymous with a more generalised concept that applies to a vast range of collective acts, as outlined in this chapter. The images that these events conjure are extraordinarily varied, apparently bound together only by evidence of the congregation of a group organised through contemporary communications technology devices.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

'It's all been done before (years before) and there is simply no unique "wow" factor left to attract the views' (Hepburn, 2010)

Since 2003 many websites have been created to facilitate the organisation and sharing of flash mob events. Some have achieved great success (Improv Everywhere, 2012), while many others became dead links in less than two years (Nicholson, 2005). In fact, Bill Wasik, the creator of the original events that instigated the coining of the term 'flash mob', proclaimed the death of the flash mob as a movement within one year of its inauguration (Walker, 2011; Gore, 2010). Many blog comments and articles (Hepburn, 2010) have since concurred with Wasik's (2006) assertion. This is despite counter-arguments to the extinction thesis that involve citing the continually increasing search results in their thousands that link to the documentation of these events (Molnar, 2009). The major thread within the criticism against flash mobs and the possibility of their sustainment is the failure to maintain the essence of surprise.

Wasik asserts that the flash mob existed to highlight the 'hollow[ness of the] hipster culture that spawned it' (Wasik, 2006). He believed that the short series of mob events in 2003 achieved this end and therefore the continuation of the practice became redundant. It is not the element of social critique that provoked the spread of the flash mob, nor has it become a prevalent feature of the definition of the term, it is the unexpectedness that binds flash mobs (Molnar, 2009; Walker, 2011) and incites appeal in organisers, participants and observers alike (Partners Project, 2011). Whether it is the sense of enjoyment or achievement gained (S. Lake, October 15, 2011), the public space reclaimed (Creagh, 2004) or the promotion achieved – the means to reaching these goals exists in the central element of surprise. The theory of punctum provides a point of convergence for the final analysis of the nature, methods and transformation of the flash mob.

The 'pointless act' that the OED (2008) describes can be seen as the avenue employed to produce the flash mob's moment of punctum. In the busy, directive and driven metropolitan whirlwind of the world's major cities, the undefined, unpublicised yet very disciplined act of a flash mob is very noticeably incongruous. This attracts viewership to the initial time-based experience on the street or within whatever public foyer it takes place and extends to the viewership of those in their own homes in front of their computers. Barthes (2000) speaks of the desire for the creative practitioner to work within the realm of punctum, to create these 'piercing' moments within their work in order to attract an audience. While it has been admitted that the flash mob is often not seen as synonymous with art practices, a clear lineage has been established with reference to previous theses (Molnar, 2009; Walker, 2011) that places the flash mob

within the art realm. Contemporary organisers and participants of flash mobs have confidently reiterated this perspective (Stephanie Lake, October 12, 2011). Flash mobs, as an alternative to much of the work immediately recognisable as artistic practice, do not sit within the pristine walls of the 'white cube' gallery or the acoustically configured and aesthetically considered tiered seating of a theatre. Flash mobs reside in our squares and streets, stations and shopping centres. The creative production of a moment of punctum is achieved in the public realm and therefore freely distributed to countless others via free online visual broadcast websites. The most popular flash mobs do not seek to alienate the viewer as perhaps the Happenings of the 1960s and or Wasik's mob events did. The viewer is able to bear witness to celebratory dance flash mobs without feelings of unease or discomfort disturbing their focus. Recognisable expressions of the flash mob, such as the popular singing, dancing musical-like numbers are unusual more for their site, scale and spontaneity than for the act itself.

The strong attraction to be involved in the creation of punctum in a world dominated by studium-driven 'meaning-making' apparently has significant appeal to a wide spectrum of individuals. An opportunity to shift their concept of self from their routine roles and schedule draws people into participation. The flash mob participant becomes complicit in the creative production of desired state punctum, a condition that is increasingly difficult to achieve in our visually saturated world.

Modes of viewing addressed in Chapters One and Two can be drawn back to the concept of punctum. Explicit links can be made to the different identities of the viewer - the flâneur, the detective and the badaud or gawker. Most specifically, punctum relates initially to the badaud. The effect of punctum's piercing moment conjures images of the wide-eyed awe of the badaud in succumbing to the allure of the visually engaging. Punctum causes the viewer to move beyond the passive, mild interest of the flâneur and out of the inquiring mind of the detective into the mode of sensory experience and simple wonder at the world. Context or prior knowledge are not necessary - conditions that the sensory-dependent mode of the badaud relies upon. Flash mobs keep alive the child-like wonderment that new stimuli create. Just as the new and vibrant early modern urban environment of Paris stimulated the concept of Surrealism, flash mobsters continue in this vein to visually enamour their audience.

Chapter Three examined the necessity of technology in the 'success' of flash mobs and considered questions regarding the ability to control the means of production. In the fast-paced, visually over-stimulated environment we live in, we are

bombarded with images, both moving and static, often via the screen. Within this environment, it has become increasingly difficult to surprise, given the advent of countless interactive and visually stimulating new technologies, products and practices. The advent of the flash mob, enabled by the various communication technologies we have available today, is an effort to create punctum. People then trawl the Internet, on sites such as YouTube, for stimulus that surprises and attracts our attention. From the figures presented in the statistical explication of YouTube viewings, it is quite clear that for many, footage of flash mobs supplies the visually arresting and entertaining surprise for which individuals 'surf'.

In Chapter Four, the transformation of and transition away from the flash mob defined in the introduction is outlined. In the search for moments that pierce the usual, flash mobs have been appropriated and undergone alterations in attempts by countless individuals to keep the flash mob fresh and new.

Novel ideas are being continuously suggested and explored. Charlie Todd, the creator of Improv Everywhere, states that he has dozens of suggestions for new events coming in each week (Partners Project, 2011). While many of these are not flash mobs, similarly many of them are synonymous with the major conventions of the flash mob. An event in which dozens of individuals came dressed in blue shirts and khaki pants (the uniform of the staff) to a Best Buy store and 'st[ood] around' (Partners Project, 2011), is an example of a new suggestion from a US teenager that appealed to others and was then enacted. Originality is difficult and the organisational structures of the flash mob utilise the collaboration enabled by social media to produce unique flash mob events.

The scale and scope of flash mob events have expanded, they have been rehearsed, participants hired and trained and expertly filmed. The T-mobile 'professional' flash mobs as part of their *Life's for Sharing* campaign epitomise the increased sophistication that has evolved in regard to flash mobs, particularly in the employment of these events as promotion strategies by large organisations and corporations.
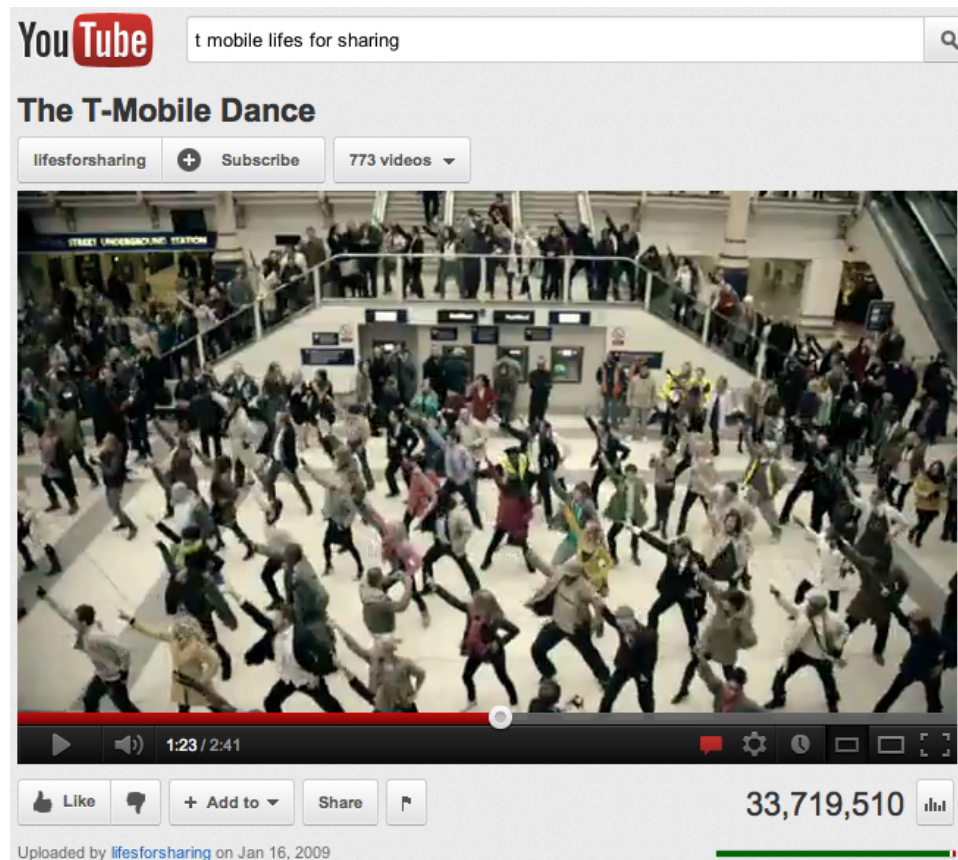

Figure 21. Screenshot of T-mobile dance flash mob in Liverpool St. Station, London, UK (Lifesforsharing, 2009).

Figure 22. Screenshot of T-Mobile *Welcome Back* flash mob advertisement at Heathrow Airport, London, UK (Lifesforsharing, 2010).

People's expectations are increased when the realm of the norm is expanded by repeated exposure to flash mobs via the Internet and popular television programs. The professionalisation of the flash mob has been criticised for creating the stale and passé flash mob (Nextness, 2011). To continue to effectively hold viewer attention and public intrigue, the standard must continue to be raised. It is to be expected that each flash mob concept will be exhausted and any moment of punctum lost as it reaches a certain dilution point due to overexposure. Due to the immediacy and the ability of information to spread across the globe at a very rapid rate, this timeline of eventuality inevitably becomes truncated. The flash mob in some senses has reached this point of exhaustion within the decade. Media focus has shifted to more dramatic and serious incidences, quite different but still in accordance with some characteristics of the original flash mobs. Social activist groups do continue to utilise the flash mob to raise public awareness. While the notion of the flash mob is less surprising, the format still draws sufficient viewer attention in order to communicate a message.

At a recent professional development session on teaching grammar in schools that I attended, an interesting phenomenon was touched upon in the session with Beverley Deriwianka, a professor of language education at the University of Wollongong, NSW. A question was raised regarding when one should use two separate words, a hyphen or a compound word. The distinction was explained that when a term enters the English language it begins as two words. Over time it then shifts to include a hyphen instead and eventually the hyphen is removed to create a compound word when it has been sufficiently entrenched within the common vernacular (B. Deriwianka, March 21, 2012). This explanation is supported by explanatory grammar websites (Capital Community College Foundation, 2012). Wikipedia, everyman's encyclopedia, now has the compounded 'flashmob' in brackets within the flash mob definition (CNN 2009 as cited in Wikipedia, 2012). The above line of thought suggests that once 'flashmob' becomes the conventional grammatical formation without exception, any novel qualities will have disappeared. Many articles are already using this form of the term (Hepburn, 2010; Diener, 2011).

Improv Everywhere have preempted this imminent progression by already publicly severing ties with the term. Todd states on the website that their missions are in fact not flash mobs (Improv Everywhere, 2012). While many of their events meet the criteria of the working definition of this thesis, they have explicitly expressed that they do not wish to be seen as falling under with this term. This gesture is symbolic of the desire to maintain the ability to surprise. It is through the focus on punctum, inexplicably pure surprise, that Improv Everywhere maintains its success. 'Giv[ing] strangers a unique experience' is at the core of Improv Everywhere (2012). Not binding the Improv Everywhere organisation to the flash mob exclusively has allowed their prankster missions to shift freely, unbound by definition and accompanying restrictions or expectations. No other organisation has achieved such fame or success through engaging in flash mob-like events. They continue to remain popular and in March 2012 were close to reaching 100,000 official subscribers (Improv Everywhere, 2012).

The flash mob, a concept that relies on the element of surprise, must be free to transform if it is to maintain the integrity of its core goal the creation of a moment of punctum. In concurrence with developments in nineneenth-century viewership (the beginnings of the urban capitalist world driven by consumption), attracting the attention of the consumer is of paramount importance. Later, various technological means enabled the flash mob to achieve a perceived spontaneity and allowed non-performers to surprise themselves through their own participation, retrospectively viewing the

event through ubiquitous social media channels. These tools also allowed the manipulation of the pervasive modes of production and consumption, the discovery of an unexpected level of freedom within a system in which roles are largely prescribed. Transformations involving advertisements and ostensibly the promotion of social causes revisit the core goals of consumer capitalism. More dramatic and at times sinister transformations of the flash mob and their consequent media coverage also follow the path of the provocation of shock and disbelief. Flash mobs outline one trajectory of the continuous search for moments of punctum in order to interrupt the routine of largely pre-planned, repetitive daily lives, generally producing expected outcomes. Their resonance within the fast-paced globalised world should be expected and encouraged to be diverse, ever-changing and ultimately brief.

This thesis has in the introductory chapter established a working definition of the term flash mob and outlined the set of methodologies that have been employed throughout. Chapter One considered the context out of which the flash mob has arisen. Notable societal developments from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were included and theoretical constructs applicable to the analysis of the flash mob delineated. Chapter Two detailed the application of this pertinent theory, particularly concepts from the fields of visual and material culture within the constructs of capitalist consumerism. Chapter Three examined the manner in which flash mobs are organised, executed and documented, focusing significantly on the crucial part that communication technologies play in these processes. Chapter Four saw the investigation of the latest expressions of the flash mob, comparing these recent practices to flash mob definitions and previous expressions of this phenomenon. These chapters have culminated in this final discussion, summarising this analysis of the flash mob phenomenon by employing the binding theoretical concept of punctum. In light of this concluding discussion, it is likely that the flash mob, as defined in the introduction (OED, 2008), will soon pass into the history of performative practices and phenomena of collective action.

LIST OF FIGURES

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. A Flashmob Manifesto

1. A flash-mob **doesn't have a purpose**.

1.a. Although it may express an **opinion** or a **statement**.

2. A flash-mob **doesn't have leaders**.

3. The flash-mob **is not an illegal action**. Those who take part at a flash-mob must not engage in any kind of conflict with the authorities or with other persons.

4. The flash-mob is **a sum of individuals**, never a herd.

5. A flash-mob must remain **discreet**. The police authorities, the press, or other officials must not find out about the flash-mob or the identity of the participants.

6. For #5 to happen, the methods used for transmitting the instructions of a flash-mob are as follows:

a) the fastest and most efficient method: **e-mail** to the trusty persons;

b) fast method, but not the cheapest: **SMS**;

c) risky method, but efficient: post the message on **forums**, **discussion groups**, **hubs**;

d) **from mouth to mouth**, with the same condition: only to the trusty persons.

7. **The trusty persons** are those who know the principles of flash-mob and are committed to respect them.

8. The announcement of a flash-mob must **never be made through mass-media**. Never print the announcement or the instructions of a flash-mob. Nothing written physically.

9. The participants must **synchronise their watches** after Greenwich, in relation with the time zone of the event: http://wwp.GreenwichMeanTime.info.

10. The mobbers must take with them their **IDs** and show them to the authorized forces, but only after they have proved their authority and gave a plausible reason for the action taken.

11. The mobbers always come alone and leave alone, from and to different directions. **The gathering must not happen before the established time.** If there are too many persons going in the same direction, stop before a shop window, tie your shoe laces, look at the sky for a moment.

12. The mobbers **do not communicate** with one another during the flash-mob.

13. The mobbers **do not know** each other during the flash-mob (even if they do,

actually).

14. A flash-mob must not last more than **10 minutes**. The gathering and the dispersion must be natural and exact.

15. In case the press or the authorities find out about the flash-mob, **do not leave the event**. If you're being asked why you are there, give an absurd answer ("I like growing skunks", "I want people to have a ride on the subway", "I ran out of tampons") or use the answer you previously agreed on. **Do not give the press the occasion to fix an official opinion.**

16. A successful flash-mob is not the one which gathers the most people, but the one that manages to respect the principles of the flash-mob. **A single person can create a flash-mob.** Of course, size *does* matter, but not more than doing it right. In time, maybe even those who happen to be there when a flash-mob starts will come play. That would be the beauty of flash-mob.

Appendix B. Guiding interview questions.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. How did you find out about this event?
2. What did your preparation for this event involve?
3. Why did you choose to partake in this event?
4. In retrospect, what would you say you got out of participating in this event?
5. Have you taken part in similar events before?
6. Would you be interested in being part of future similar events? Why or why not?
7. What does the term flash mob mean to you?
8. Why do you think flash mobs have emerged in today's society?
9. Would you classify flash mobs as rebellious? Why or why not?
10. Would you agree with the statement that flash mobs are an expression of community? If so, in what way/s?
11. Do you think flash mobs are still a growing phenomenon? Explain.