

THE PERFORMANCE AND RECEPTION OF FLASH MOBS:
AUTHENTICITY, YOUTUBE, AND THE FANTASTIC

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the performance methodology and reception of various flash mobs performed from 2003 to 2015. This twelve year history is separated into three periods. The first period consists of Bill Wasik's initial flash mob performances, a series of eight events known as the Mob Project. These performances establish the three commonalities I use to define and identify flash mob performance- the anonymity between performer and spectator, the overloading of space, and the performance of incongruous action. The second period begins with the popularity of the T-Mobile flash mob commercial "Dance," which introduced the use of a Protagonist and the "performer/spectator." The third period is characterized by the use of flash mobs as advertisements by sponsoring organizations in order to achieve authentic alignment between themselves and their audience. All three periods are unified by a common potential reception on the part of the spectator- a reception that corresponds to Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the Fantastic.

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Introduction

The first flash mob took place in May of 2003 in New York City. It involved approximately one hundred people, mostly strangers, in a Macy's department store. It was over in less than ten minutes and there was little documentation or coverage of the event that did not originate directly from the participants themselves. If it had been the only flash mob it seems likely no one except those one hundred strangers would remember it. Instead, at the time of this writing in early 2015 a YouTube search for the phrase "flash mob" results in roughly 6,700,000 video results. The top three flash mob headlines according to a Google search made on January 21, 2015 provide readers an article about the flash mob performed for actress Betty White's 93rd birthday, an article about the lack of police response to a vehicular flash mob in which hundreds of motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles clogged highways in Florida, and a video in which a man proposes to his girlfriend in an elaborate flash mob performance. What began partly as a prank and partly as a social experiment in New York City just over a decade ago has become part of the popular culture.

This dissertation aims to identify and analyze the commonalities of performance methodology and reception for the wide variety of events that have fallen under the title of "flash mob." In the course of this identification and analysis, I will raise and attempt to answer many related questions concerning flash mob performance and reception. These questions include, but are not limited to, the following: who were the hipsters and how did their cultural identity influence the performance methodology of the flash mob? Why did flash mobs shift from a performance methodology which could accommodate a wide range of simple actions to a performance methodology focused on dance? Why is authenticity so vital to flash mob reception

and how is it created, communicated, and utilized by flash mob organizers? Finally, who are the audiences for flash mob performance and how do the changes in performance methodology and mediation alter reception?

The popularity and acceptance of the flash mob is just beginning to attract scholars. This has led to a lack of specificity in the description and analysis of the preparation, performance, and reception of these notoriously diverse events. Flash mobs are treated as uniform in most of the news media and in the scholarly writing concerning them; it is as if all flash mobs are prepared, produced, and experienced in the same fashion, no matter where or by whom they are performed or viewed. Worse, the term “flash mob” has no uniform definition even amongst scholarly work. This results in the term being applied equally to the initial Mob Project flash mobs, the various genres of flash mob performance that developed after 2003, and even events that are almost certainly not flash mobs but share certain characteristics with them, such as the Occupy Wall Street protests and the London riots of 2011. If flash mobs are ever to experience any sort of serious academic investigation it is necessary to define the boundaries of the form itself- to define “flash mob” as performance, to identify the commonalities and genres of this mode of performance, and to analyze the reception of these performances both live and mediated. Such a foundational work does not exist, whether due to lack of interest or lack of awareness. It is my goal in this dissertation to provide such a foundation and encourage greater investigation into this massively popular and academically overlooked mode of performance.

Performance reception is still very much a challenging and underexplored field. The fact that the process of spectation and engagement, so crucial to the existence of performance itself, remains untheorized when it comes to a massively popular mode of performance such as flash mobs perhaps explains the difficulty and disinterest flash mobs have to-date faced as a scholarly

pursuit. Furthermore, flash mobs exist at a unique point in the spectrum of performance; they are indebted as much to practical trickery as to musical theatre, they function as both meme and performance, and they require both a live connection to a physical space and mediation and virality to attract their audience. In short, flash mobs are unique in both their performance methodology and in their reception. The fact that this uniqueness has been overlooked is a mistake that will be rectified by this study.

With a more defined performance methodology and a deeper understanding of their reception, it is my hope that a greater appreciation for flash mobs both as performance and as a subject for further study will develop. In addition, while Todorov's theory of the Fantastic has proven vital to my analysis of flash mob reception, its usage outside of literary analysis is rare. Even inside of literary analysis the theory's usage is usually limited by genre- Gothic horror, science fiction, or fantasy. The application of a literary theory like Todorov's to a mode of performance based in reality, such as flash mobs, is very nearly unheard of, yet it is exactly this pairing that enables a consistent definition and understanding of flash mob performance methodology and reception. This combination may open the door to a wider range of scholarly possibilities both for the Fantastic in particular and for the use of theories previously thought to be medium- or genre-specific in general.

Beyond drawing attention to an underexamined performance mode through the use of an underutilized theory of reception, this dissertation is significant in the way that it combines theory, performance records, and audience opinion to create a performance and reception model that is stable and applicable not merely for the flash mob's current form but for all forms previous and hopefully for all forms to come. Obviously, there is no way to completely future-proof a theory; unforeseen modes of performance and spectation may significantly alter our

understanding and experience of flash mobs, rendering my theories obsolete. However, I have attempted to create a theory that is malleable enough to withstand a variety of performance and reception considerations; this was necessary in order to accommodate the variety of methodologies and mediums already contained within the term “flash mob.” While there are a plethora of flash mob-related topics left unexamined within this current study, it is my hope that this study remains applicable, significant, and foundational as regards flash mob performance and reception for a long time to come due to its focus on inclusiveness rather than division in its methods and procedures.

I separate the twelve year history of flash mobs into three distinct categories- the Mob Project performances masterminded by Bill Wasik (upon which all following flash mobs are based), the “dance mob” genre popularized by T-Mobile’s “Dance” commercial, and flash mobs that serve to advertise their sponsors. These categories are organized primarily chronologically, though there is overlap; flash mobs have been used as advertisements since 2005 at least, and I examine “Dance” in both Chapters 3 and 4, first as a performance and then as an advertisement. The methodology I use to analyze flash mob performance methodology and theorize its reception changes from chapter to chapter, depending upon the resources available, but in all chapters I utilize blog posts, web forum comments and discussion, descriptions of the events by participants and spectators, and news reports to recreate the flash mob performances under investigation. This is supplemented when possible by YouTube videos of the performances, which I utilize as performance texts. I also use my own reception of these videos as a spectator. Most of the theoretical grounding for my analysis of flash mob performance and reception is laid out in detail in Chapter 1, but in short I use performance studies with a particular focus on the work of Schechner to create a baseline understanding of flash mobs as performance, Todorov’s

theory of the Fantastic with additions from Baudry, Chaim, and others to theorize reception, both live and mediated, and the work of Gilmore and Pine to analyze how flash mobs generate authenticity when deployed as advertisements.

It is worth noting that I have not served as a participant or live spectator at any of the events I am examining, nor have I interviewed any of the participants or live spectators. Both of these approaches could arguably create a compelling and potentially very different analysis than the one which I have created here. My intent is not to divine the organizer's intent nor to state that my theorization of reception matches one-to-one with the reception of every flash mob spectator. Reception cannot be guaranteed or predicted and is the result of countless contributing factors affecting each individual spectator before, during, and after the event. There are no doubt many different possible reception models for flash mob performance just as there are many possible reception models for any single work of art, much less an entire type of art. My goal is to provide a framework by which identification of this protean performance style can be made, response theorized, and, to a certain extent, effectiveness analyzed.

There are areas of flash mob performance that I do not cover in this study. The use of flash mob performance as a form of protest has existed since before the Mob Project's conclusion, and while there are many high profile flash mob protests available on YouTube I do not specifically analyze any of them. I do think that there is a fascinating possibility for disruption and activism inherent in anonymous mob performance and that a useful study could be made of the flash mob as a tool for social change. I myself have connected flash mob performance with Hakim Bey's theory of the Temporary Autonomous Zone in previous papers and I could potentially see an argument being made that flash mob performances function as the re-enactment and potential revising of the social, similar to Schechner's belief in the

transformative power of performance as a space in which to try out and ratify change. As for this current work, I believe “protest mobs” could be usefully analyzed not only through the basic commonalities, videographic tropes, and reception I theorize but more specifically in relation to my analysis of the sponsored flash mob in Chapter 4. Protests and advertisements have a shared interest in audience alignment and directed confrontation that ends in consumer or citizen action, so much of the same analysis could be made to serve both.

The flash mob has garnered a respectable amount of media attention yet it is almost entirely ignored in the academy. The little scholarly writing that does exist on flash mobs serves for the most part to uphold its conception as a monolithic entity, a popular form without noticeable or important iterations. The Fall 2010 issue of *Theater* includes an article by John Muse entitled “Flash Mobs and the Diffusion of Audience” which serves as an introduction to the phenomenon (though Muse includes Improv Everywhere in his discussion, which is problematic as the founder of Improv Everywhere has gone on record stating his “missions” are not flash mobs, a stance with which I agree). *Acts of Citizenship*, edited by Engin Isin and Greg Nielson, features a well-constructed article on flash mobs by John Saunders, who focuses on one specific mob event and so sidesteps the larger issues of commonalities in performance and reception I am pursuing. However, his conception of the flash mob as a highly political act connects with the appeal of transgressive behavior I mention in Chapter 2. Dr. Susanne Shawyer’s dissertation *Radical Street Theatre and the Yippie Legacy: A Performance History of the Youth International Party, 1967-1968* deals with flash mobs in her final chapter, situating them as direct descendants of the YIP’s performance art events, and Cayley Sorochoan’s Master’s thesis *Flash Mobs and Urban Gaming: Networked Performances in Urban Spaces* analyzes the flash mob’s connection to communication technologies as a form of apolitical consumption.

While both of these feature techniques and points of view worth engaging with (Sorochoan's analysis of flash mob videos and Shawyer's connection to the happenings of the 1960s specifically), both of them also assume that the flash mob is a consistent form rather than as a collection of contradictions and differences in need of analysis.

The April 2013 volume of *Text and Performance Quarterly* features Dr. Rebecca Walker's article "Fill/Flash/Memory: A History of Flash Mobs." This article analyzes many of the original Mob Project performances and connects them genealogically to the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, and the Happenings. Dr. Walker's article is a fabulously creative and personal exploration of the flash mob as an avant-garde descendent, a useful touchstone for beginning an analysis of the form. However, as her article ends with the Mob Project, it is more properly thought of as a history of the flash mob's first year of existence and so does not touch on the wild variety and viral expansion the form has experienced since. Dr. Walker also only briefly touches on reception, connecting the effects of flash mob spectatorship to a sense of surprise, celebration, and occasionally political resistance. As I argue that reception is the clearest way to theorize and define the wide diversity of performance styles the term "flash mob" encompasses, I will expand this analysis substantially.

A fair amount of writing about flash mobs comes from outside the field of theatre. The majority of articles dealing with flash mobs (not counting newspaper articles) actually come from advertising and economic journals; *Marketing Management Journal*, *U.S. Banker*, *Credit Union Journal*, and *Adweek* have all featured articles on flash mobs in the last six years, to name a few. These articles will be quite useful in Chapter Four, which looks at the use of flash mob as an advertising technique. There are also a few technological journals that look at flash mobs, such as *IEEE Spectrum* and *Technology and Learning*, but these are generally overviews of the

form as opposed to in-depth looks at their symbiotic relationship with technology. Articles can also be found in art and dance journals, and *Curating Architecture and the City* edited by Sarah Chaplin and Alexandra Stara includes a Florian Kossak article about the ways in which flash mobs have changed the conception of the display space. While this article is not at all concerned with the commonalities of flash mob performance and reception, it is a useful counterpoint to my own examination of the way some flash mobs overload and repurpose performance sites.

Many concepts that require definition will be given appropriate space to develop as they are introduced into my argument. However, some basic ideas that provide the groundwork for understanding how flash mobs are organized, performed and received as both live and mediated events require definition before starting into the argument proper.

1) Viral and virality: these words refer to the ability of ideas and behavior to spread rapidly and to vast recipients thanks to the increased interconnectedness of modern society. This interconnectedness is often attributed to faster and more widespread access to the internet and cellular communication. Named for the spread of viruses, virality is not merely a measure of how far and fast an idea can spread but to what degree the idea is adopted; viral ideas replicate and remake themselves over and over, leading to trends with massive cultural adoption and awareness.

2) Memes: first used by Richard Dawkins, a meme is an idea that spreads virally. The name refers to the fact that these ideas, which can be behaviors or beliefs, are spread by people mimicking each other; these ideas require the mimetic impulse in order to transmit themselves. The concept of the meme has been used to explain everything from the spread of religion to the popularity of slogans and catch-phrases. Flash mobs are a type of meme.

3) Videography: In this dissertation this word refers to the capture of flash mob performance on digital recording media. The word is virtually synonymous with “cinematography” at this point due to the preponderance of digital film over physical film users even in motion picture production. Connected with this word are the various terms I use to describe the flash mob videos under examination. These terms are all fairly basic in film-making, but for the sake of clarity I am including their definitions as I understand them in the following list:

Angle- the perspective of the camera in relation to its subject. This can be high, low, or canted (a tilted camera).

Aspect Ratio- the width to height ratio of a frame of film. Usually how a film is shot will in part determine the aspect ratio in which it is projected.

Continuity Editing- the classic Hollywood school of film editing which favors making logical, coherent connections between objects or people in the same space and time. This school of editing also tries to hide its various editorial techniques so that the audience focuses on the narrative of the film.

Cut- any change in angle or placement from one shot to the next; the space between one shot and the next. Cuts can also feature various effects; for example, a fade is a shot gradually turning black or starting black and turning gradually to visibility, or a shot being gradually replaced by another.

Diagetic- something taking place within the narrative of the film. For the purposes of flash mob videography, diagetic can be said to be nearly synonymous with profilmic.

Frame- while this refers in film to a single cell of film, for my purposes frame refers to the “box” created around the profilmic event by that cell of film- essentially, whatever is captured on film

versus the “real life” objects and people that were left outside the area of the camera’s focus. I also use it to refer to characters or objects surrounded by a frame inside the shot- a character in a doorway, for example.

Overcranking- a shot that features the action moving much slower than it would in real life, also called “slow motion.” Undercranking is its opposite.

Pan- a shot in which the camera moves to the left or right.

POV- I use this term to refer to discrete camera positions within the videography of a flash mob. These could be connected to a specific point of view (for example, a camera position that is meant to stand in for the live spectator) or they could be merely one specific and identifiable position that is utilized in the filming of the event.

Profilmic- referring to the events that occur in front of the camera; the “real world” events the camera documents and records.

Shaky-Cam- A technique created through the use of a handheld camera, shots that feature shaky camera work are usually used to communicate the reality of the situation they are documenting. Often used in found footage films (in which the footage is purported to be taken out of its original context) and mockumentary (a film which utilizes documentary-style cinematography and editing for comedic effect).

Shot- a single, continuous recording of a variable length. Also called a “take.” I will reference many types of shots throughout this study. A close-up shot is the face and perhaps shoulders of a human body, a medium shot is knees to head, a long shot is more than head to toe. An establishing shot is one that focuses on the location of the shot and is usually a long or extreme long shot. A shot/reverse shot is a sequence of two or more shots in which a character is shown to be looking at someone who is then shown to be looking back at the character (this is related to

“eyeline match,” when a character is shown looking at an off-screen person or object that is then shown in the next shot).

Zoom- a shot in which the camera appears to move closer or farther away from the subject.

In regards to my own terminology, there are some foundational concepts that I will explain here. First, I use the phrase “established patterns” to describe the normal occupancy, flow of movement, and intended functionality of a flash mob performance site. For example, a train station has various standard occupancy levels depending on date and time of day, movement patterns for these occupants that are determined in part by architecture, and an easily discernible purpose, especially for those that utilize the space on a daily basis. This term has some potential for subjectivity built into it (a coffee shop might be a place to drink coffee for one person, a place to work for another) but no matter how it is interpreted the established patterns of a space should be relatively easy to determine for the live audience of a flash mob based on observation and context clues. For the at-home audience, these patterns are usually communicated in the opening moments of the YouTube video that documents the performance.

There is a shift in the way I describe some of the performers of flash mobs from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3. Because of the changing responsibilities for flash mob performers that accompanies various alterations in performance methodology I will occasionally refer to performers of flash mobs in Chapters 3 and 4 as “performer/spectators.” When this term is used it is meant to refer specifically to those performers who initially act as spectators but who are revealed to be performers in the course of the event. This is to differentiate their function from flash mob performers in different periods or genres of flash mobs as well as to differentiate their function from the initial, single performer of the dance mobs, whom I refer to as the “Protagonist.” I use the term “Protagonist” because it communicates not only this performer’s

unique position as a “first actor” but also because of its theatrical connection; in dance mobs, the audience is meant to eventually identify with the experience of the Protagonist in much the same way a theatrical audience is, and the term “Protagonist” calls to mind an individual who is separate from but still connected to a larger group of performers in both theatrical and flash mob performance. In addition, in Chapter 5 I will examine a flash mob that utilizes multiple groups of performers who enter as cohesive and identifiable groups rather than as individuals or as a single, larger group. In order to differentiate these smaller groups of performers and their unique function in the moment of performance from the general pool of flash mob performers I use the term “chorus.” Again, this term is chosen due to its theatrical connection; the small groups of performers share entrances, exits, and actions in much the same fashion as a Greek chorus.

A quick note on spelling and capitalization is required as well. One can occasionally find flash mobs referred to as “flashmobs” in news reports and online. I think that the two word spelling, “flash mob,” is more accurate given the etymological connections I make in Chapter 2 and the two possible origins for the name itself. I will use the two word spelling throughout this study unless the single word spelling is found in a direct quotation. For certain words in the dissertation- specifically “Happenings” and “Fantastic”- I have chosen to always capitalize the initial letter. In the existing scholarship that deals with these events and theories, capitalization is not consistent; some scholars use it and others do not. I choose to capitalize both for ease of understanding as both words have a mundane function and a proper function as it were- something can be “fantastic” without it corresponding to Todorov’s “Fantastic,” in other words. By capitalizing both words every time they are used to refer to either the performance art events inspired by Allan Kaprow or Todorov’s theory I hope to reduce confusion for the reader in regards to which meaning of the word is intended.

Chapters and Content

Chapter 1- Performance Studies, the Fantastic, and the Connection to Happenings

In this chapter I will introduce the various theories that will be used to analyze flash mob performance and reception. Many of these theories are from the world of performance studies and Richard Schechner himself- for example, the identification of the actions of flash mob as restored behavior and the idea of “dark play.” In addition, I will explain the various ways that framing informs my analysis, from Schechner’s three frames of performance to Bateson’s metacommunicative framing to Bennett’s two frames of reception. I will also introduce theories outside the realm of performance studies, specifically Todorov’s theory of the Fantastic which, when applied to flash mob performance, provides the key to understanding the reception of these events. Finally, I will compare flash mob performance to the Happenings of the 1950s and 60s.

Chapter 2- Into the Fantastic: Flash Mobs in the Early 2000’s

In this chapter I will analyze Bill Wasik’s eight original flash mob performances, known collectively as the Mob Project. First I will give a brief background of the project as well as of the New York subculture that inspired the creation of the flash mob, the hipsters. Then, using Wasik’s own writings and materials supplemented by news reports and blog entries and online discussion I will outline three commonalities that together serve to define flash mob performance in the Mob Project and since- the anonymity between performer and spectator, the overloading of the performance space, and the repurposing of said space through the performance of incongruous action. Throughout this chapter, I will focus on how these three commonalities work together to create the experience of the Fantastic for the spectator. Finally, I will compare the Mob Project events to a similar New York mob performance group, Improv Everywhere.

Chapter 3- Performing the Fantastic: Dance Mobs and the YouTube Audience

After a brief analysis of early flash mob video, memes, and the various genres of flash mob performance that have developed since the end of the Mob Project, I will examine one of the most well-known and influential flash mobs ever performed- “The T-Mobile Dance.” I will demonstrate how “Dance” displays the three commonalities of flash mobs both in performance and videographically. A large portion of this chapter will focus on analyzing how the changes made to flash mob performance methodology in “Dance”- the use of a Protagonist and performer/spectators- affected reception both for “The T-Mobile Dance” and most flash mob performance since. Finally, I use a second dance mob video- “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video- 21st March 2009”- to demonstrate the influence “Dance” has had on flash mob performance methodology and reception.

Chapter 4- Leaving the Fantastic: Flash Mobs, Sponsorship, and Authenticity

In this chapter, I will analyze the changes to flash mob performance methodology and reception that come with their use as advertisements. These “sponsored mobs” can be purpose-built to serve as advertisements or re-purposed after the fact but are unified by the reception of authenticity. This reception aligns the spectator with the performers of the flash mob and, therefore, the sponsoring organization, and directs a confrontation between the aligned spectator and an inauthentic experience, product, concept, or competing organization. I will use “The T-Mobile Dance,” AT&T’s competing “Dance” commercial, and two flash mobs performed on college campuses to demonstrate that the successful alignment of the spectator with an authentic

experience as embodied by the flash mob performance is crucial to directing their actions as consumers.

Chapter 1-

Performance Studies, the Fantastic, and the Connection to Happenings

This dissertation is grounded in the performance studies tradition of Richard Schechner and will use many of Schechner's concepts to theorize flash mobs as performance. For example, Schechner's foundational concept of performance as restored behavior provides a starting point for understanding flash mobs as performance.¹ Even though flash mobs are, according to the definition I will establish in Chapter 2, performed only once and often not rehearsed in the traditional theatrical definition of the term, the actions that comprise the performance of a given flash mob are still a repetition of a previous action or mode of being. The actions of the earliest flash mobs are commonplace- asking a salesperson for assistance, standing in line, applauding. The performers of a flash mob are aware that they have performed, considered performing, or seen these actions performed before; the audience is likewise aware of the everyday nature of these actions. There is usually an attempt to perform the action of a flash mob in such a way that it seems authentic, similar to what William Gillette called "the illusion of the first time;" there may even be an earnest attempt to perform the action of the flash mob successfully within the context of the performance.² However, while it may appear to the audience that the action of the flash mob is genuine and extemporaneous, the truth is that the action has been considered, viewed, and performed at some other time and place and is simply *restored* for the pleasure of the audience and performers in the moment of performance.

¹ Schechner, Richard. *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36-7

² Gillette, William, and George Arliss. *The Illusion of the First Time in Acting*. (New York: Printed for the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1915), 20

While such everyday actions as those featured in the earliest flash mobs could be studied as performance outside of the flash mob itself, it is their repetition in contexts unsuited for their performance- contexts in which the actions of the performance are not “socially sanctioned modes of behavior” in the words of Marvin Carlson- that creates the primary aesthetic effect which defines these actions as flash mob performance.³ I will return to this aesthetic effect later in this chapter; for now, my focus is on the distinction between context and action in a given performance, what Schechner and others refer to as “framing.” In *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner gives an extended example of framing: a visit to a restored 17th century village in which performers re-enact 17th century culture for 21st century spectators.⁴ The modern spectators in the middle of the village can be thought of as existing in three concentric frames; the outermost frame is their 21st century home, the middle frame is the performance of the 17th century village, and the innermost frame is the idea that, despite being enveloped by a physical and performance context separate from their experience, the spectators still carry with them the knowledge of the 21st century, leading to a double awareness of both the outer frames. It is this awareness that allows the spectator to understand that what they are viewing is a performance, a restored behavior, even though the physical context of the performance envelops them. Schechner provides a modern comparison between environmental theater and more traditional theater in order to demonstrate that the physical context of a performance can cause these frames to shift and change, which will in turn alter the reception of the event and perhaps even reduce the awareness of the event as performance:

³ Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4

⁴ Schechner *Anthropology* 92. In Schechner’s example he uses the then-contemporary “20th century;” I have updated that to “21st century” for the sake of clarity.

One of the big differences among performance systems is the framing made by the physical environments- what contains what. In ordinary theater the domain of the spectator, the house, is larger than the domain of the performer, the stage, and distinctly separate from it. In environmental theater there is a shift in that the spectator and performer often share the same space, sometimes they exchange spaces, and sometimes the domain of the performer is larger than that of the spectator, enclosing the spectator within the performance.⁵

Flash mobs tend to have a strong connection to their physical surroundings, relying on the contrast between action and context to achieve their effect. This enclosing of the spectator within the performance is very much the case in flash mob performances and will be returned to in Chapter 2.

The idea of framing is indebted to and built upon by many other scholars. Roger Caillois and Johann Huizinga both define “play” (a term synonymous with “performance” for Schechner) by mentioning that it is set apart from the normal world and normal time- in other words, it is framed.⁶ This framing marks performances and play of all kinds as liminal or liminoid, both terms coming from anthropologist Victor Turner.⁷ In studying ritual, Turner described such performances as liminal activities- actions that are set apart from accepted modes of behavior and that provide a space and time to challenge, revisit, and perhaps ultimately reify those accepted modes.⁸ Liminoid is the modern equivalent of liminal activity; in Turner’s estimation, modern society is too large and fractured to reify accepted modes of behavior

⁵ Schechner *Anthropology* 94-96

⁶ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Trans. Meyer Barash. (New York: Free Press, 1961) and Huizinga, Johann. *Homo Ludens*. (New York: Beacon, 1950).

⁷ Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

⁸ Turner *From Ritual* 28

consistently, leading to actions that are still set apart but possessing the potential to resist and subvert to a much greater degree.⁹ This is a useful distinction for my study as flash mobs can function as either liminal or liminoid events within their immediate performance contexts as well as within the larger cultural contexts they have occupied throughout their so far twelve year existence.

Finally, while Schechner outlined three frames that govern performance, Susan Bennett outlined two frames that govern reception. In her book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Bennett described her methodology and theoretical approach to the study of reception as follows:

The model this study will use is also of two frames. In this instance, however, the outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection. It is the interactive relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience.¹⁰

This is important to my own study for two reason. First, it places reception at the center of the creation of meaning that accompanies any performance event; the spectator is given agency in Bennett's theory, serving as an envoy between the cultural grounding of the performance- the "nest for the theatrical event" as Schechner put it- and the event itself.¹¹

⁹ Turner, Victor. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology." vol. 60. no. 3, pp. 53-92.

¹⁰ Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 139

¹¹ Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. (London: Routledge, 2003) 195

Second, the idea that the audience's reception of a performance event is created in conjunction with the larger cultural surrounds of the performance as well as with the immediate cultural community of spectators at the performance is key to understanding how reception can be theorized in the case of flash mobs. The community made up of individual spectators at a flash mob will have a range of responses to the event but the choices made in the performance in relation to that community- choices like the anonymity between performer and spectator- absolutely have an effect on that community's reception at large.

The basic theatrical pattern Schechner introduced in "Towards a Poetics of Performance"- a three stage event consisting of Gathering, then Performing, then Dispersing- will be used to describe the performance patterns that unify all flash mobs.¹² In addition, his description of commonplace urban events he calls "eruptions" will be used to explain the natural groupings of performers and spectators found in what I call "dance mobs," discussed extensively in Chapter 3.¹³ Due to my focus on reception, more than either of these concepts I will rely on Schechner's idea of "dark play" to identify and describe the methods by which flash mobs achieve their primary aesthetic effect. Dark play, in Schechner's words, "means that some of the players don't know they are playing."¹⁴ There are knowing players and unknowing players- in the case of flash mobs, the performers and the spectators respectively- and it is this lack of understanding, this omission of the clearly stated rules, stakes, and expectations that define play and performance, that most clearly unifies the infinitely variable types of flash mob performance into a single mode. This unity is a unity of reception and aesthetic effect, and is enabled most effectively by dark play.

¹² Schechner, Richard. *Essays on Performance Theory*. (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977) 112

¹³ Schechner *Essays* 112

¹⁴ Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2002) 106

Dark play is tied into the idea of framing in that, in dark play, the frames which allow the spectator to identify the performance *as* performance are obfuscated or erased. This leads to a confusion in reception that is at once pleasurable and disconcerting, a form of play Caillois called “vertigo”- “an attempt to destroy momentarily the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind.”¹⁵ The reason dark play results in this confusion is in part due to a lack of metacommunicative framing as described by Gregory Bateson. Bateson gives the example of dogs play-fighting in order to describe this type of framing, stating that somewhere in a fight that may seem real to the observer there must be a metacommunication that alerts the participants that the fight is, in fact, merely play and not a threat.¹⁶ This framing, Bateson argues, is necessary for play to exist, but notes in “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” that there are certain complex forms of play in which the metacommunication “is constructed not upon the premise ‘This is play’ but rather around the question ‘Is this play?’” and therefore results in a potentially harmful confusion.¹⁷ Dark play falls under this complex category as it does away with the metacommunication that enables spectators to quickly and accurately recognize play when they see it. For this reason, dark play (and by extension flash mob performance) is potentially dangerous to participant and spectator. As Joseph Roach describes the intersection of restored behavior and dark play: “One cannot be at play without the self-reflexive acknowledgment of being at play...One cannot take the moral measure of others without some way of knowing when they’re playing.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Caillois *Man, Play* 23

¹⁶ Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. (New York: Ballantine, 1972) 181

¹⁷ Bateson, Gregory. “A Theory of Play and Fantasy.” *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 144

¹⁸ Roach, Joseph. “‘Deep Play, Dark Play’: Framing the Limit(less).” *The Rise of Performance Studies*. Ed. James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal. (London: Palgrave, 2011) 278

The Fantastic, Flash Mobs and Reception

I have mentioned before that I theorize flash mobs as a performance mode that is unified by aesthetic effect rather than by performance methodologies or stylistic concerns. I have also mentioned that this effect is similar to Caillois' play-form "vertigo" and that this pleasurable disorientation results from an erasure of the framing devices that allow spectators to identify performance *as* performance, or dark play. There is another theory, one outside of the realm of performance studies or even performance in general, that I argue most accurately reflects the aesthetic effect produced by flash mob performance; this theory is Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the Fantastic.

In Todorov's 1973 book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, he introduces the Fantastic as a way to describe a particular literary genre (or a subgenre, as some have argued, that exists between Gothic and Horror literature). His stated goal was to discover "a principal operative in a number of texts" through a structural analysis of the unifying tropes, motifs, and aesthetic effect of these texts.¹⁹ The principal operative he discovered is described in the following passage, worth quoting at length:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination-- and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of

¹⁹ Todorov, Tzvetan, and Robert E. Scholes. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 3.

reality--but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us... The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.²⁰

In this passage Todorov lays out the pivotal experience of the Fantastic as he defines it; a character encounters an event which contrasts so greatly with the context of said event and the character's prior experience that, for a variable period of time, it causes the character to doubt their own perception and understanding. Eventually the character comes to a decision about the nature of the event, placing it in one of two potential categories:

1) The Uncanny, in which the event does not in fact break with the character's understanding of the world and its rules. In this case, the event is usually explainable by trickery or science outside of the character's knowledge; even though that character is confused for a period of time about the event's origin, other characters are not. Therefore the event could still be said to take place within Carlson's "socially sanctioned modes of behavior" mentioned earlier.

2) The Marvelous, in which the event truly does break with the established and understandable rules of the known world. In this case, the event is usually supernatural or otherworldly in origin, according to Todorov.

In either case, the moment the character decides which of the above categories the event belongs in that character has left the Fantastic. Their decision has been made and they can react accordingly; the Fantastic exists for that character only for as long as their indecision and lack of understanding.

Todorov enumerated three conditions that must exist in order for the Fantastic to occur. First, the reader must accept that the narrative occurs within the real world. In other words, the context of the narrative must be the recognizable world of the reader, and the reader must be able

²⁰ Todorov 25

to safely assume that the natural laws that govern the character encountering the event are the same natural laws that govern the reader. Second, the reader must identify with the character encountering the event; the hesitation the character experiences is the mirror of the hesitation experienced by the reader. Third, the reader must reject that the event is merely symbolic, poetic, or allegory existing in the level of the text only; for the character, and therefore for the reader, the event must be occurring in reality.²¹ What unifies these three characteristics is the focus on the reader's experience. While the Fantastic does in fact occur for the character encountering the literary event, what is most important and defining for Todorov about the Fantastic is that it is an aesthetic effect that occurs for the reader. It is partially this focus on reception that makes the theory an ideal match for my theory of flash mob reception.

Other theorists have helped to define the Fantastic, both before and after Todorov, and yet other theorists have attempted to expand the usage of the Fantastic beyond the genre Todorov helped delineate. Karen Pike points out that while the most recognizable genre motifs of Fantastic literature are ghosts, goblins, and other supernatural beings, the Fantastic effect is most keenly experienced by the reader when the event encountered is *not* supernatural but grounded in the real world of the reader, improbable rather than impossible.²² For flash mob performance this is obviously an important distinction. Flash mob performances are not impossible in any way; their actions merely contrast so greatly with the established patterns and expectations of their performance contexts that their improbability is highlighted. The previously mentioned Roger Caillois, writing a few years after describing his play-form "vertigo" and a few years before Todorov defined the Fantastic, stressed the importance of this contrast with context in fantastic literature:

²¹ Todorov 31

²² Todorov 26

The essential procedure of the fantastic is the apparition: that which cannot happen and occurs anyway, at a precise place and time, within a perfectly delineated world from which one believes the mystery to be forever banished. Everything seems as it is today and was yesterday: peaceful, ordinary, nothing unusual, and then there is the inadmissible slowly insinuating itself into this world or suddenly occurring.²³

This description could be applied usefully to flash mob performance as written; when combined with Todorov's theory of the Fantastic it provides fertile ground in which to analyze the effect and reception of these performances.

In *The Fantastic in Literature*, Eric Rabkin provides a scale by which the effectiveness of the Fantastic might be judged. His scale begins with the irrelevant, an event that is unexpected but has no connection to the established ground rules of its context- a non sequitur event. Similar to this is the not-expected, a surprising event that fails to create a true Fantastic effect due to its much smaller timespan. The real beginning of the Fantastic effect as Todorov defined it, according to Rabkin, is the dis-expected, in which the reader's attention is drawn away from the cause of the event, leading to the event creating confusion and hesitation of a Fantastic nature. In this case the ground rules of the event's context are upheld but it appears temporarily that they are being broken or bent beyond reason. The most successful end of the scale is the anti-expected, the fullest realization of the Fantastic in which the event and the established patterns and rules of its context are in direct opposition.²⁴ This scale is useful for my purposes as it provides a similar way to judge the effectiveness of various flash mobs. It is not my purpose to judge this effectiveness more than is necessary. However, the variety of actions, lengths, and

²³ Cailliois, Roger. *The Dream and Human Societies*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 19

²⁴ Rabkin, Eric. *The Fantastic in Literature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) 10

contexts that comprise flash mob performance is staggering; acknowledging that simply because one event is more effective than another does not mean those events belong to different performance modes frees me from having to make limiting, divisive, and ultimately futile attempts at defining flash mob performance by length, number of participants/spectators, or setting.

Rabkin also provides multiple metacommunicative “tells” by which the Fantastic might be identified. The first- statements made by the narrator- is useful for literature but not generally for flash mob performance. The exception to this is in the descriptions that often accompany videos of flash mob performance; these include credits, introductory material on the website to which the video is posted, and supplementary materials such as “making of” videos. All of these could be said to function in a similar manner to a literary narrator. The second and third “tells”- the astonishment of the protagonist or a reversal of logic that had previously been well established- are both useful with some variations, especially in relation to the videography of flash mob performance. While this scale and these signals are helpful to my study, Rabkin’s greatest contribution to the Fantastic is his expansion of the theory of the Fantastic from literature to architecture, psychology, and beyond. I do not agree with all of Rabkin’s expansions of the Fantastic; I am in agreement with Pike in that I think his suggestion that the Fantastic does not strictly speaking require a real-world setting is of little use to my analysis and is perhaps expanding the theory beyond the point of usefulness in general.²⁵ However, this particular expansion from the experience of reading the Fantastic to other modes of reception is of obvious interest to me as a performance scholar.

²⁵ Pike, Karen. *Theories of the Fantastic: Postmodernism, Game Theory, and Modern Physics*. (Dissertation, University of Toronto 2010) 28

Nor is Rabkin the only scholar to see the potential of the Fantastic beyond the literary. In fact, my application of the Fantastic to flash mob performance is inspired in part by Carol Martin's work on "theatre of the real." Theatre of the real is theatre that "claim[s] specific relationships with events in the real world."²⁶ This can mean metatheatrical performances and popular entertainments like dance marathons and sideshows, theatre that utilizes the tools of documentary and quotation, and theatre that uses technology to capture, reframe, and revisit "the real," among other qualities and methodologies. Martin begins her book *Theatre of the Real* with a moment she herself experienced that I think can most accurately be explained by the aesthetic effect of the Fantastic. In 2007, Martin attended a performance of Adelheid Roosen's play *Is.Man* in which the lead actor, Youssef Sjoerd Idilbi, had chronic issues with his microphone. This led to a moment near the climax of the play in which he discarded his microphone and attempted to continue the performance without it. The rest of the story is best told by Martin herself:

After less than a minute of speaking without amplification, Idilbi threw up his hands, walked upstage, tossed aside a piece of drapery that was part of the set, picked up a plastic water bottle, and left the stage. The audience heard the door to the theatre slam shut behind him. Had Idilbi walked out of the theatre in the middle of his performance? For several moments the audience sat in undecided quiet, not knowing whether the events that had just taken place were part of the performance or a rude eruption of real life into the play about a real event...For my part, as a member of the audience, I was in a state of performance theory ecstasy – a state interrupted when one of the freshman honor students who had

²⁶ Martin, Carol. *Theatre of the Real*. (London: Palgrave, 2013) 4

accompanied me to the theatre turned to me and asked, “Is this for real?” After a pause, and at great risk of losing face for the rest of the semester, I whispered definitively, “I don’t know.”²⁷

In this description one sees all the hallmarks of the Fantastic: an event which contrasts greatly with the established rules, expectations and patterns of its context (though in this case it is an intrusion of the real into the theatrical that causes it), an identification of reader with the character that encounters the event (though in this case, since the text being read is a performance, “spectator” would be more apt), and a period of time in which the spectator or reader is confused and hesitant concerning the relative reality of the event they have witnessed or read. In Martin’s case, the boundaries between the real and the theatrical have been erased, and it is this “overlap and interplay between ‘theatre’ and ‘reality’” that drives her analysis and attempt at defining the “theatre of the real.”²⁸

This eradication of frames in “theatre of the real” calls to mind Bateson’s metacommunicative framing and Schechner’s dark play. In addition, it brings up the fact that the effect of the Fantastic is, in performance studies terms, another example of this eradication- a dark play (literally, in the case of Todorov’s original Gothic focus) that leaves its spectator reeling, temporarily lost in their attempt to determine where the boundaries of reality lie and given precious few clues to help them make sense of their experience. Martin mentions the Fantastic explicitly in her discussion of Hotel Modern’s Holocaust puppet performance *Kamp*; she cites Freddie Rokem’s argument that the Fantastic is often made to coexist with the “real” of documentary-style theatre about the Holocaust because the contrast between the two elements sharpens the confusion and horror felt by the spectator, creating a more accurate alignment of

²⁷ Martin 3

²⁸ Martin 4

spectator to subject.²⁹ I will expand on how this notion of alignment can be made to work for the sponsors and organizers of flash mob performance in Chapter 4.

The eradication of frame is not the only shared space I see between theories of the Fantastic and performance studies. Bounded by temporality and caught between one state of being and the next, the experience of the Fantastic for character and reader is a liminal one. The Fantastic event interrupts regular existence and the individual confronted by the Fantastic must conclude that interruption by either mending the rift it created, thereby returning to the status quo, or by accepting the rift as natural and therefore moving beyond their previous state of existence, making the Fantastic a potentially “transcendent moment of sorts.”³⁰ In addition, Caillouis points out the similarity between the Fantastic and game playing, emphasizing the element of choice that both concludes the Fantastic as well as allows its aesthetic effect; one must choose to believe at least somewhat in the fearful possibility of the improbable for the Fantastic to take hold, and one must eventually confirm or deny that belief in order for the period of the Fantastic to end. This choice, and the delaying of this choice, results in the pleasure of the effect for the reader or spectator: “Here fear is pleasurable, a delectable game.”³¹ Finally, Joel Malrieu theorizes that the Fantastic reflects culture in transition and presents, in its confrontation with the unknown, an opportunity for the reader to rethink and potentially reshape their own society.³² This potential for change is the same potentially subversive power contained within liminoid performance and represents what is, for Schechner, the essential heart of all

²⁹ Martin 87

³⁰ Pike 5

³¹ Caillouis *Dream* 26

³² As analyzed by Pike, 16

performance, theatrical or otherwise: “transformation...a way to experiment with, act out and ratify change.”³³

Happenings and Flash Mobs: Similarities and Distinctions

To many, the performance methodology of flash mobs as I define them in Chapter 2 may seem reminiscent of the Happenings of the late 1950s/early 1960s. The performances most commonly referred to as Happenings occurred between 1958 and 1963, though there is room for debate even in the dating of these performances; Gary Botting and others identify John Cage’s 1952 Black Mountain College performance *Theatre Piece No. 1* as the first happening and the 1963 end-date is not universally agreed upon by scholars or participants. Named for and primarily defined by Allan Kaprow’s 1959 performance *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, Happenings and the Bill Wasik-period flash mobs alike are defined more by a lack of a uniform methodology and definition even amongst participants than any other characteristic. Still, there are similarities and, more importantly for this study, differences that are worth discussion (if only to understand why Happenings will not be featured more prevalently in this dissertation).

Like the Mob Project, the Happenings of this period were performed in New York, initially in the Reuben Gallery, then expanded into converted storefronts; Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store*, the 1962 Second Street storefront that housed his Ray Gun Manufacturing Company studio, combined “the sale of cheap merchandise and the sale of serious art,” art that happened to be based around the cheap merchandise found in second-hand stores.³⁴ Happenings were influenced heavily by visual art and the New York art scene at the tail end of the 1950s; Kaprow

³³ Schechner *Essays* 123

³⁴ <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/oldenburg/>

wrote in one of his Happenings manifestos that he wanted to work toward a “reciprocity between the man-made and the ready-made,” a clear reference to Marcel Duchamp’s art of everyday objects, itself a progenitor of the Pop art movement of the late 1950s.³⁵ This attempt to “become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life” informed the design choices of the New York Happenings; found objects and a cheap crudeness dominate images of these performances, and as the movement grew it expanded out of the gallery space and into found spaces more aligned with their design aesthetic- empty lots, abandoned storefronts, and industrial warehouses.

For *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, the Reuben Gallery was split into three compartmentalized performance spaces. These spaces were divided by a created environment composed in part of semi-transparent plastic walls and painted panels featuring words and images related to Kaprow’s previous work. Audience members were given strict instructions and performance cues to regulate their participation. Instruction cards given to the spectators informed that each of the six parts of the performance contained three actions, or “happenings” (hence eighteen total), and that “the beginning and end of each will be signaled by a bell. At the end of the performance two strokes of the bell will be heard...There will be no applause after each set, but you may applaud after the sixth set if you wish;” these instructions also indicated when the audience should move between performance spaces.³⁶

Despite what the name might suggest, the “happenings” or actions performed in *18 Happenings* were not driven by chance or participant whim; every action performed by the spectators or performers was conceived, choreographed, and directed by Kaprow himself.

³⁵ Kaprow, Allan. “Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings.” *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*. Ed. Teresa Bradshaw and Noel Witts. (New York: Routledge, 2014) 277

³⁶ Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996) 129

Kaprow in fact hated the name “Happening” as did many of his contemporaries. He felt the name undermined the hard, precise work from which *18 Happenings* and his other pieces resulted, and while “Happening” became widely adopted by spectators and scholars it was never fully accepted by many of the artists whose work scholars place within the confines of the genre.³⁷ As I will discuss in Chapter 2, the name “flash mob” has also been rejected by some participants for whom the term seems to apply. This similarity between flash mobs and Happenings, while small, results from a larger, more important similarity; both flash mobs and Happenings require the performance of actions disconnected from their context to achieve their aesthetic effect. As a result, there is a great diversity of action featured in the performances of both flash mobs and Happenings and it is this diversity of action that makes both genres so difficult to define.

Until 1962, Kaprow’s Happenings were performed in gallery spaces. In performance, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* featured simultaneous, alogical action performed according to a rigidly rehearsed and directed schedule. Participants performed everyday actions- sweeping, sitting, squeezing an orange, and others. These actions were performed outside of any narrative structure and with no apparent attempt at communicating meaning. In addition, three actions were performed simultaneously during each sequence. This simultaneity combined with the nondescript quality of the actions contrasted with the established patterns of behavior and expectations of the gallery space in which it was performed. It is not unthinkable that this contrast might have provoked in the spectators of *18 Happenings* a response very similar to the pleasurable yet disconcerting “shudder” of the Fantastic.³⁸ However, it is not merely the contrast of action to context that establishes this effect in flash mobs; an additional component is

³⁷ Kirby, Michael. *Happenings*. (New York: EP Dutton, 1965) 47

³⁸ Pike 14

required, and it is the lack of this component in Happenings that provides a key distinction between the two performance models.

The performance of everyday actions that are out-of-sync with their settings partially defines flash mob performance, but the choice of these settings results in a potentially different reception than in the performance of Happenings. Flash mobs generally take as their performance sites very public spaces- shopping malls or other commercial spaces, parks, train stations, etc.- and these spaces are temporarily repurposed and reshaped through the performance. Happenings likewise reshaped their performance spaces in a very different way. The performance sites for Happenings, whether galleries or storefronts, were reshaped architecturally prior to the event itself; the Reuben Gallery was partitioned in *18 Happenings*, the Martha Jackson Gallery was filled with tires in *YARD*, etc. Michael Kirby argued that this physical connection to visual arts and artistry- the creation of an artifact that is in keeping with visual arts trends of the period and which is then placed inside a gallery built for the exhibition of visual art- is more important than any other quality of Happenings in defining and identifying them as such.³⁹ This reshaping is part of the larger event and partially responsible for their aesthetic effect but, since it is a physical reshaping that exists prior to the beginning of the performance and after the performance is finished, the audience has a good deal more time in which to decide how to resolve their potentially Fantastic experience. I argue that part of the reason flash mob performances are so effective is because of their brevity; the audience has little time in which to resolve this Fantastic rupture in the established patterns of the space. In Happenings, the audience had time before, during, and after the performance to experience the created environment and reconcile it, and the actions of the performance, with the gallery space

³⁹ Kirby 11

that surrounds it. Therefore the Fantastic effect, such as it might have existed in Happenings, was lessened by familiarity.

This familiarity brings up another distinction between flash mobs and Happenings. In both flash mobs and Happenings there is an attempt at undermining and redefining the performer-spectator relationship, altering it from the traditional theatrical or visual arts model of reception into something arguably more active. Kaprow referred to himself as a “viewer-participant” and desired for all involved in the performance of a happening to be defined as such.⁴⁰ He was interested in the elimination of pure spectatorship, and defined even the most casual of audience members as a vital and natural performer and part of the event:

When a work is performed on a busy avenue, passersby will ordinarily stop and watch, just as they might watch the demolition of a building. These are not theatre-goers and their attention is only temporarily caught in the course of their normal affairs. They might stay, perhaps become involved in some unexpected way, or they will more likely move on after a few minutes. Such persons are authentic parts of the environment.⁴¹

This description could have been made about a flash mob performance and would be just as apt and accurate.

The spectators for *18 Happenings* were given a great deal of information concerning the performance as well as the expectations placed upon them during the performance. They were moved repeatedly around the constructed environment, a decision that, while it removed agency, also removed “spectatorial authority...the individual’s experience of *Eighteen Happenings* was

⁴⁰ Sell, Mike. *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 145

⁴¹ Kaprow 277

inevitably partial, accidental, and unverifiable.”⁴² So one sees here a focus on physical activity different from most theatrical and visual arts spectatorship combined with an attempt to destabilize the spectator’s normal complacency and power. The spectators of a flash mob also lack authority and are forced to confront their complacency through their experience of the Fantastic. The key difference between these spectator-performer relationships lies in the awareness, or lack thereof, the two audiences bring to their respective events.

In flash mob performance the audience is unaware of the performance until it begins. Even then they are given no clues as to the nature of the event they are witnessing, no insight into its methodology or intent.⁴³ This lack of awareness is what ultimately enables the Fantastic effect to occur; it leads to the event seeming authentic, a genuine and potentially unexplainable rupture in the established patterns of the space. In *Happenings*, nearly the opposite is the case. The initial audience for *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was comprised of “art-world luminaries” purposely invited to see a performance at an art gallery.⁴⁴ These audience members did not know what specifically they were going to witness but they knew beforehand that they were going to serve as spectators. In addition, while the actions and aesthetics of *18 Happenings* contrasted with its gallery setting- commonplace behaviors and ragged, found object design- the fact that it was set in a gallery placed the event squarely in the world of artistic practice, giving the audience a set of parameters within which to situate their experience. In fact, the particular audience for *18 Happenings* was potentially better equipped to process the performance than Kaprow’s

⁴² Sell 144. The name of the Happening is spelled differently by Sell here; this may be a connection to the fact that the performance itself did not have a name until the second audience mailing.

⁴³ There are of course exceptions to this; the performers of a flash mob are also spectators (as are all performers who collaborate), the lack of context clues for the performance is true of the live audience and usually less true of the YouTube audience, not to mention the changes that occur when flash mobs are advertised beforehand. I will discuss all of these exceptions in the following chapters.

⁴⁴ Crow, Thomas. *The Rise of the Sixties*. (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996) 33. I say “initial” in reference to this audience because *18 Happenings* has been performed since by other groups.

hypothetical passerby mentioned in the quotation above due to their familiarity with visual art trends. They may even have been familiar with Kaprow himself, but even if they weren't the knowledge of the name of an artist responsible for the event they were attending gave them a great deal more context than the audience of the Wasik-period flash mobs ever had. The end result is an audience for *18 Happenings* that may have been bewildered by what they witnessed; however, it was a bewilderment within strict and observable limits- in other words, not a true experience of the Fantastic. These distinctions, I argue, are sharp enough to divide the performance of Happenings and the performance of flash mobs into different categories and to justify Happenings' lack of inclusion in my study beyond this point. There may well be a potentially beneficial study that could be made of the common ground that exists between the two forms, and I hope that a future scholar will revisit this theme.

Chapter 2-

Into the Fantastic: Flash Mobs in the Early 2000's

Consider the generational cohort that has come to be called the hipsters- i.e., those hundreds of thousands of educated young urbanites with strikingly similar tastes. Have so many self-alleged aesthetes ever been more (in the formulation of Festinger et al) 'submerged in the group'? . . . Not only was the flash mob a vacuous fad; it was, in its very form (pointless aggregation and then dispersal), intended as a metaphor for the hollow hipster culture that spawned it. I know this because I happen to have been the flash mob's inventor.⁴⁵

In 2006, this quote from Bill Wasik's article "My Crowd, or Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob" dealt what was supposed to be the deathblow to the social experiment known as the Mob Project, also called inexplicable mobs or flash mobs. Wasik's intent was to draw the curtain back and reveal the truth behind the illusion- the flash mob was an experiment only ever intended to comment on the relentless conformity of the hipster subculture in New York, an experiment that would end with the co-optation of the performance model by a large corporate entity (initially Ford Motor Company, an event I will return to in Chapter 4) and the reveal of the experiment's true nature in the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, of which Wasik was then senior editor. Wasik expected the fad to die rapidly after these final two events. It is now 2015, more than a decade after the first flash mob was performed, and flash mob performance has only grown in popularity, influence, and media coverage. For all that attention, however, the most elementary questions about flash mobs remain unanswered in any academic

⁴⁵ Wasik, Bill. "My Crowd, or Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob," *Harper's* Mar. 2006: 56-7

way. What defines a flash mob? How are these events performed, documented, and discussed? How do they affect their audiences? By examining the commonalities in the performance methodology and reception of Bill Wasik's Mob Project (and mob-centered performance events from Charlie Todd's Improv Everywhere, a contemporary of the Mob Project), I will provide a framework in which all flash mob performance can be identified and analyzed.

Bill Wasik's Mob Project and the Creation of the Flash Mob

First, a brief history of the Mob Project events. Bill Wasik organized and participated in eight flash mobs as part of his Mob Project. The first flash mob, entitled Mob #2, took place on June 17, 2003.⁴⁶ Prior to the performance, Wasik created a false email account, from which he sent an email to his real email account ("real" meaning the email account that would be recognizable to his friends and co-workers). This email contained an invite to an "inexplicable" mob along with rudimentary instructions on how to join this mob (participants would meet at four different bars shortly before the event was scheduled and await further instructions) and the encouragement to forward this email to their friends. Wasik then forwarded the message to more than sixty of his own friends. At the bars on the day of the mob, ten minutes before the mob would occur, pieces of paper were passed out containing the performance instructions; the mob, two hundred strong, would assemble in the rug section of Macy's department store under the pretense that they were all from a commune and were seeking a "love rug," then depart less than ten minutes later.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ What would have been the first flash mob, Mob #1, failed to be performed because, according to Wasik, "the NYPD had been alerted beforehand, and so we arrived to find six officers and a police truck barring entrance to the store." (Wasik "My Crowd" 57).

⁴⁷ Wasik "My Crowd" 57

The following six mobs were organized and performed around similar principles. For Mob #3 the initial invite was again electronic and the specific performance instructions were distributed physically in the Grand Central Station food court. Adjacent to the station was the performance site- the Grand Hyatt, which the performers entered seven minutes after 7pm and, after five minutes of mingling in the lobby, proceeded upstairs to the circular mezzanine overlooking the lobby. Five more minutes after assembling upstairs the mob burst into fifteen seconds of applause and dispersed anonymously. Mob #4 found the performers pretending to be tourists from Maryland so fascinated by a shoe store that they were moved to take copious pictures of the displays, whereas Mob #5 again required the performers to adopt another identity, this time making “nature sounds” in Central Park.⁴⁸

Mob #6 featured performers worshipping an animatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex in the Times Square Toys R Us (“It is like a terrible god to you,” according to the performance instructions passed out on slips beforehand).⁴⁹ Mob #7 had performers lined up at a side door of St. Patrick’s Cathedral to buy tickets to see The Strokes, a band who had released their extremely popular debut album in late 2001. Mob #8, titled “the end” in the subject of the initial email, took as its performance site an alcove across the street from the headquarters of magazine publisher Condé Nast (a very inside joke, as Bill Wasik then served as senior editor at Condé Nast publication *Harper’s Magazine*).⁵⁰ This final mob featured a shift in performance methodology which resulted in unforeseen results. Instead of the slips of paper with performance instructions utilized for most of the mob project flash mobs, the instructions for Mob #8 were broadcast from a stereo on-site. However, the size and enthusiasm of the performers made it impossible to hear

⁴⁸ Wasik, Bill. *And Then There's This*. (New York: Viking, 2009) 29 and 38

⁴⁹ Wasik “My Crowd 65

⁵⁰ Wasik *And Then* 42

the instructions, allowing for the mob to be diverted by a single participant holding up a peace sign. Wasik described the scene with dismay: “to my horror the mob began chanting ‘Peace!’”⁵¹ That was the final Bill Wasik-designed mob and the end of the Mob Project itself until the reveal of his intent and identity in March 2006.

It is possible to reconstruct the performance process and production schedule for the Wasik flash mobs based on the brief overview discussed above:

- 1) “Cast” the performers using forwarded emails that maintain the anonymity of the organizer. Additional viral “casting” ensures that any one performer is unlikely to be familiar with more than a small percentage of other performers before the day of the performance itself.
- 2) Assemble the performers at a location that is nearby and unaffiliated with the performance site. Disseminate performance instructions prior to performance via passed slips of paper or otherwise pre-arranged methods (the boombox in Mob #8, for example).
- 3) Performers travel to the performance site, perform a small amount of simple actions, then leave the performance site within ten minutes of arrival, disperse and return to a state of anonymity. Each “script” (the combination of the action and the location of the flash mob) is performed only once.

This process is remarkably similar to the process of a traditional dramatic production, albeit truncated: plan and cast the production, provide performance instructions in the form of script and rehearsal, perform, and return to established patterns of existence at the close of the final performance. With this process established, a more detailed analysis of the commonalities

⁵¹ Wasik *And Then* 43

of Mob Project performances will allow for the creation of a definition of flash mob performance as well as provide an understanding of the effect these types of performances have on audience reception. First, I will examine the common inspiration and pool of participants for the Mob Project events- the group of young, technologically fluent trend-setters known as the hipsters.

Technology, Etymology, and the Hipster

Bill Wasik named his experiment “the Mob Project,” referring to the gathering in his initial invitation email as “an inexplicable mob.”⁵² However, the events are far better known as flash mobs, a name attributed to Sean Savage of the blog Cheesebikini.com. The origin of the phrase seems to derive from two separate sources, depending on whom one reads: noted tech writer and futurist Howard Rheingold and science-fiction author Larry Niven.⁵³ In 2002, Rheingold published the book *Smart Mobs*. The title referred to a potential event in which individuals act as a cohesive group while utilizing “mobile communications and pervasive computing technologies” to remain anonymous and unknown to their fellow group members.⁵⁴ Rheingold explained that these mobs will consist of technologically fluent amateurs, decentralized young people co-opting technology for purposes for which it was not originally intended. He compared this potentially subversive use of technology to the “hacker ethic” of the 1960s which stated, in part, that authority should always be mistrusted in favor of the democratization of information and technological access. Rheingold argued that wireless technology that maintained the anonymity of the individual user would allow these smart mobs

⁵² Wasik *And Then 5*

⁵³ Wasik cites Niven as the primary influence for the name in “My Crowd,” while Savage cites Rheingold on Cheesebikini.com.

⁵⁴ Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs* (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2002) XIII

to “discover new ways to band together to resist powerful institutions. A new kind of digital divide ten years from now will separate those who know how to use new media to band together from those who don’t.”⁵⁵

It seems obvious that Bill Wasik was counting on this “digital divide” to a certain extent when he began the Mob Project. As the quote that starts this chapter demonstrates, he created the experiment in part to mock the faddishness of hipster youth culture. In his 2009 book *And Then There’s This*, Wasik remarks that the germ of the Mob Project had been the idea of using email to invite spectators to a fake show, and the viral spread of the invitation emails used in the Mob Project along with coverage of the events on blogs such as cheesebikini.com and satanslaudromat.com ensured a technological fluency and fascination with the internet that in 2003 very much lay in the hands of those in their twenties and thirties. The name change from “smart mob” to “flash mob” might stem from the connection to Niven’s fiction which I will introduce later this chapter; it could, however, just as likely have come from the reliance on electronic communication for the anonymous and viral organization of these mob performances. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies “flash” as a verb meaning to “express or communicate by a flash or flashes; esp. send (a message, news, etc.) by radio, telegraph, etc.”⁵⁶ It is not hard to extend that “etc” to email in this case; the lighting of the notification message as the email is forwarded and received, the speed by which it is possible to disseminate the production schedule for the performance, and the unprecedented access to potential performers as the email achieves virality and spreads beyond the address book of the first recipient, then the second, then the third, and so on.

⁵⁵ Rheingold XIX

⁵⁶ Flash.” Verb def. II 10a. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. 5th ed. Vol. 1 2002

The connection between youth and technology as mentioned above is worth exploring further. The Mob Project events relied heavily on viral email forwarding and blog coverage to grow the popularity of the flash mobs. Could a flash mob even be organized without electronic communication?⁵⁷ Potentially. A mass-mailing to anonymous recipients through traditional means (a harvested address list, for example) could achieve a similar result. The issue with that tactic, as any marketer knows, is that it requires multiple such mailings to get the recipient to even open an unsolicited, anonymous letter, much less act on it. Attempting to organize a flash mob by mail could either require a far lengthier organizational period or result in a flash mob with far fewer performers, or both, not to mention requiring more time and money on the part of the organizer, potentially reducing the amount of flash mob performances overall by introducing an economic barrier.⁵⁸ Thus, I would argue that while technology in the form of electronic communication is not a required component in flash mob performance methodology its presence greatly enhances the effectiveness of those organizing and performing flash mobs; it reduces the amount of time and effort needed to organize the performance while maximizing potential participation. In addition, Wasik's choice to organize the Mob Project events electronically ensured that the majority of his email's recipients would belong to the youthful subculture that was both the target of his satire and most likely to act on the email's contents- the hipster.

It is worth discussing the youthful targets both of these viral emails and of Wasik's intended satire in order to determine the effect their participation might have had on the Mob Project's performance and reception. As mentioned above, part of Wasik's stated intent in

⁵⁷ While none of the Mob Project events utilized social media or SMS as organizing tools, the potential for virality exists in them to an equal if not greater degree than it does in email and webpage forum communication.

⁵⁸ This is not to say that there is universally equal access to the internet, nor that there are no economic considerations related to internet access; I am merely making the observation that the internet provides a generally cheaper and easier method of organizing flash mob performances.

creating the Mob project was to mock New York's "hipster" youth culture scene. Defining what exactly "hipster" means, however, has proven difficult; much like any other youth cultural movement- grunge, punk, etc.- hipsterism as a movement shifts and changes as time passes and the outward cultural identifiers of such a movement (like clothing and music) cycle in and out of popularity. Furthermore, the members of such a movement rarely agree on the boundaries of the movement and, like the artists associated with Happenings, often disagree with their own inclusion in the movement. It seems common to define these subcultures only after their moment of greatest significance has passed, a task attempted by Mark Greif of *New York* magazine in an October 2010 article entitled "What Was the Hipster?"⁵⁹

The word "hipster" itself has its roots in jazz and is seemingly synonymous with other jazz-age lingo such as "hep cat" and "hepster." The word "hippie" is derived from this 1940s usage, and like "hipster" was used both as an identifier and as a pejorative. The contemporary usage of the word, according to Greif, was coined in 1999 to describe a subculture of young New Yorkers from the Lower East Side. He defines this subculture as such:

The hipster is that person, overlapping with the intentional dropout or the unintentionally declassed individual—the neo-bohemian, the vegan or bicyclist or skatepunk, the would-be blue-collar or postracial twentysomething, the starving artist or graduate student—who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class, and thus opens up a poisonous conduit between the two.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ In my opinion, the opportunity to sound the death knell of a fad or cultural movement like hipsterism is the very definition of a poisoned chalice. Most often one's prognostications are proven premature; this has certainly been the case for Mark Greif, author of the article in question, and for Bill Wasik as well, as I will discuss later in this study.

⁶⁰ <http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>. The mention of "postracial" is a reference to the fact that the word "hipster" also has strong racial connotations and connections to cultural appropriation.

This “poisonous conduit” manifests itself in the forms of an ironic nostalgia and a capitalist mode that Thomas Frank called the “rebel consumer.” This ironic nostalgia, Greif argues, was born from an early 1990s fear of sincerity “because all genuine utterance would be stolen and repeated as advertising.”⁶¹ This led in the hipster to an ironic distance that was nonetheless interested in the artifacts of a time when genuine emotion could still manifest, hence the hipsters’ predisposition towards wearing trucker hats and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer (both originally popular in the 1970s). Frank’s “rebel consumer” is an individual that “convinces himself that buying the right mass products individualizes him as transgressive.”⁶² Knowing *what* product is the right product to buy in order to achieve this transgressive status likewise becomes an identifying mark of hipsters. The hipster subculture is famed for their interest in cultural objects (especially clothing and music) that have not yet become popular or appreciated by the masses; many of the trappings of hipsterism, like trucker hats for example, were massively adopted after their popularization amongst hipsters.

This state of being constantly ahead of the curve in one’s appreciation of music, art, literature, and fashion requires a substantial commitment of time and energy. This, in turn, leads to the use of “hipster” as an insult. As the trends which hipsters rapidly adopted moved from their own subculture into the mainstream, hipsters’ appreciation for the trend soured; this allowed them to present their own social superiority by having known about the trend before the masses while simultaneously being able to dismiss the trend due to its new-found mass consumption and popularization. According to Greif, this fascination with knowing trends before they are trends leads to a social structure in which many of the movement’s members are merely hangers-on:

⁶¹ <http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>

⁶² <http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>

Somewhere, at the center, will be a very small number of hardworking writers, artists, or politicians, from whom the hangers-on draw their feelings of authenticity. Hipsterdom at its darkest, however, is something like bohemia without the revolutionary core. Among hipsters, the skills of hanging-on—trend-spotting, cool-hunting, plus handicraft skills—become the heroic practice. The most active participants sell something—customized brand-name jeans, airbrushed skateboards, the most special whiskey, the most retro sunglasses—and the more passive just buy it.⁶³

This habit of spending time and energy searching for interesting cultural objects and trends so that one may purchase and display them, thereby collecting the transgressive, authentic status the objects denote, has resulted in the term “hipster” being used as “an insult that belongs to the family of poseur, faker, phony, scenester.”⁶⁴

In order to attract the attention necessary for the Mob Project to become viral (and therefore ensure that his satire would actually have both target and audience), Wasik created flash mobs to be attractive to hipsters. The Mob Project events were secretive and ambiguous. Their original description as “inexplicable” revealed nothing about the context or action of the intended performance. In fact, the only information given to the would-be performers was the time, date, and location in which they should gather before the performance itself; the actual “script” of the flash mob, as it were- the slips of paper containing the setting and action- was not disseminated until just before the performance.⁶⁵ Wasik commented on this secrecy in *And Then There's This*, writing that he intended flash mobs to be...

⁶³ <http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>

⁶⁴ <http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>

⁶⁵ This was partly in reaction to the police presence at Mob #1. In the email invite to Mob #2, Wasik informed recipients that, since someone who had received the previous email had informed the police about the

...gatherings of *insiders*, and as such could hardly communicate to those who did not already belong. They were intramural play; they drew their energies not from impressing outsiders or freaking them out but from showing them utter disregard, from using the outside world as merely a terrain for private games.⁶⁶

This quote communicates not only the importance of secrecy in the planning of the Mob Project (at least from those not involved in the Project) but also the idea that flash mobs were intended for a homogenous group of performers- the subculture of the hipster.

In order to attempt to attract this particular type of participant, Wasik's emails are peppered with language intended to appeal both to the "rebel consumer" and the "hanger-on" qualities of hipsterdom by which Greif would later define the movement. In the first email's question-and-answer section (a series of hypothetical questions posed and answered by Wasik, a feature that would remain consistent across all eight emails), Wasik responds to the question "Why would I want to join an inexplicable mob?" with the answer "Tons of other people are doing it."⁶⁷ This was, of course, mere propaganda. Wasik had no idea how many people would respond to his invitation, but by insinuating that the flash mob was already a trend (merely one as-yet unknown to the email's recipients) Wasik was attempting to activate what he referred to as the "drive toward deindividuation," the psychological urge to lose oneself in the group- in other words, the trend-following mob mentality for which hipsters were already famous.⁶⁸

performance, measures would be taken to control the spread of vital information for Mob #2, hence the slips of paper. The email did go into detail concerning the *manner* in which the undisclosed action should be performed, an indication that the authenticity of said action was a concern for Wasik on some level. I will return to this idea in following chapters.

⁶⁶ Wasik *And Then* 36

⁶⁷ <http://billwasik.com/post/104403795/the-mob-project>

⁶⁸ Wasik "My Crowd" 56.

The second email made direct, if ironic, reference to a hipster-originated trend that had already passed into the mainstream and, therefore, was worthy of the hipster's disdain; the email informed would-be participants that they should look at the bar gatherings prior to the performance for a Mob organizer "wearing one of the 'trucker hats' that is so stylish these days."⁶⁹ By the time Mob #4 had been performed the project had achieved a not insubstantial amount of media attention; the blogs and forums that had helped generate interest in the performances were starting to complain about the methodology of the mobs, perhaps in response to a perceived increase in popularity or awareness. In the Mob #5 question-and-answer, Wasik responded to a hypothetical complaint about the amount of photographers at Mob #4 with the instructions: "In general, people should feel free to take photographs at the mob. But at certain times in certain mobs, photography dampens the effect. From now on, the instruction slips for each mob will specify when and where NOT to take photographs during that mob."⁷⁰ In the next email Wasik used language that might have accessed the "rebel consumer" desire to attain transgressive status through association by promising that Mob #6 would be more visible, satisfying the hypothetical questioner's stated desire "I want to be seen whilst I mob."⁷¹

At this point there was vocal opposition to the Mob Project both in the community of participants (as represented by the afore-mentioned blogs and forums) and in media as well.⁷² This may have led to an attempt to maintain the mob's momentum in email #7 with the following question-and-answer section:

Q. Why would I want to join a stupid mob?

A. Tons of other people are doing it.

⁶⁹ <http://billwasik.com/post/104403795/the-mob-project>

⁷⁰ <http://billwasik.com/post/104403795/the-mob-project>

⁷¹ <http://billwasik.com/post/104403795/the-mob-project>

⁷² The New York Times article "Flash Mobs; Guess Some People Don't Have Anything Better to Do," among others.

Q. Tons of stupid people.

A. Wait a second. Q, have you joined the mob "backlash"?

Q. Yes, I have.

A. Why?

Q. Tons of other people are doing it. I read so in the paper.

A. But Q, don't you see? That's why people join the mob, too!

Q. Hey, you're right!

A. So why should we fight? Join forces with the tons of people who are DOING the mob. Then there will be MORE tons of people, and you will all be even more right.

Q. Makes sense to me. I'm in.⁷³

The next email would be the last of the Mob Project emails, and Mob #8 in performance was co-opted and altered by some of the participants into an impromptu and somewhat vague peace rally.

It is conceivable that if Wasik had chosen a different group to serve as the target for his satire the performance methodology of the flash mob might have been different. This is entertaining to speculate about but does little to help define the boundaries of flash mob performance. Nor, in my opinion, does the involvement of the hipster become a necessary component of flash mob performance beyond the initial seven Mob Project events; if anything, the rapid jump in popularity and media coverage experienced by the Mob Project all but ensured a lack of interest in and possibly open disdain of the flash mob by hipster culture, a trend that is noticeable in the second half of the Mob Project events. Thus, while the common focus on and

⁷³ <http://billwasik.com/post/104403795/the-mob-project>

involvement of hipsters was an important component in the conception and performance of the Mob Project events, the usefulness of this focus in considering the performance methodology of flash mobs at large does not extend beyond Mob #8. The inclusion of technology in the organization, rehearsal, and performance of flash mobs, however, is a decision that continues to be repeated by flash mob organizers. This technological focus has a few important effects on performance methodology and reception beyond encouraging a younger average age of participation, and it is these effects on which I will now turn my focus.

The First Commonality of Flash Mobs: Anonymity and its Effect on the Spectator

As discussed above, Wasik maintained an anonymous presence throughout the Mob Project; the emails were sent from a Yahoo account unaffiliated with his own, he attended and performed in the flash mobs but never identified himself as the organizer, and even in the interviews he did during the course of the Mob Project he provided only the barest details about himself. Nor was Wasik the only anonymous figure in the performances of the Mob Project; thanks to the viral, forwarded-email organization of the events the performers themselves must have been primarily unknown to each other. What this anonymity meant in terms of performance is that the actions of the Mob Project flash mobs had to be simple enough to communicate clearly on a slip of paper, short enough to be performed fully in well under ten minutes, and easy-to-perform enough that hundreds strangers could successfully and convincingly perform them with no preparation or rehearsal. I will return to the actions of the Mob Project performances later this chapter. For now, I will discuss the factor that had the greatest effect on flash mob reception and, arguably, popularity- the anonymity between performer and spectator.

Wasik referred to the participants of his Mob Project events as his “artist-spectators,” a group of performers who would watch *themselves* perform.⁷⁴ This calls to mind Allan Kaprow’s reference to himself and the other performers of Happenings as “viewer-participants,” an acknowledgement of the fact that the first audience performers have are their collaborators. Wasik did not believe that flash mobs needed or benefitted from an audience outside of the pool of performers. In this, I argue that Wasik demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of his own creation. Performances of all kinds require a spectator in order to set themselves apart from everyday existence; as Schechner and Schuman wrote, “the differences among them [performance in its various forms and ‘real’ life] arise from the agreement (conscious or unexpressed) between performers and spectators.”⁷⁵ As discussed in Chapter 1 this agreement generally comes in the form of the metacommunicative framing that surrounds performance- the small signals given by the performers that acknowledge the artificiality of the event and thereby enable the spectator to accurately process the performance. For this reason alone, Wasik’s denial of the importance of the spectator is somewhat short-sighted. However, the anonymity that existed between the performers and spectators of the Mob Project flash mobs altered the “agreement” between them so profoundly as to surpass Wasik’s initial intent and understanding of how the performances might function. To understand how, one needs to consider framing, dark play, and the Fantastic.

Flash mobs employ none of the framing necessary for audiences to reliably identify the event as performance. There is no prior announcement of the event other than the viral recruitment email (which, once read, moves the reader from spectator to collaborator).⁷⁶ The

⁷⁴ Wasik “My Crowd” 58

⁷⁵ Schechner, Richard and Mady Schuman. *Ritual, Play, and Performance*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 217

⁷⁶ At least, this is true in the Mob Project events of which I am currently writing. In Chapter 4 I will examine how the reception of flash mobs is altered when the performance is advertised or serves as advertisement itself.

performers were given strict parameters for their arrival at the performance site and their behavior immediately previous to the performance in order to ensure that anonymity was maintained. The simple actions that comprise the performances are commonplace actions restored from the memory of previous performance or observation, and, as evidenced by Wasik's emails, there was a consideration and concern for performing these actions authentically.⁷⁷ In all eight of the Mob Project emails Wasik includes explicit instructions on the length of the performances as well as the manner in which the performers should disperse following each event- namely, that none of the performances last more than ten minutes. The brevity of these performances and the immediate dispersal following them allow the audience little time to evaluate what they have just witnessed. All of these factors are enabled by the anonymity between performer and spectator, and all of them combine to produce an event with little to no metacommunicative framing telling the audience, in Bateson's words, "This is play." The end result is a performance that is difficult to identify as performance without prior knowledge of the methodology, a knowledge which was all but impossible to attain during the span of the Mob Project.

The anonymity discussed above places flash mob performance squarely in the realm of Schechner's dark play. One can see how this type of play would have been appealing to the hipster subculture; dark play is essentially about withholding information, about being a member of a small group with an awareness of a trend before it reaches critical mass. In addition, dark play is transgressive, a quality that the "rebel consumers" in the hipster subculture would have

⁷⁷ While this attempt at authentic action doesn't remove the framing that generally surrounds the performance (Stanislavski, arguably the most influential theatre theorist of the 20th century, built his acting system in part around the performance of authentic, believable actions) it does complicate the audience's reception of those actions; the actions of the Mob Project flash mobs, while commonplace, do not match their context, resulting in a confusion that I will return to later this chapter.

prized. Dark play is pleasurable for the performer because breaks the normal rules of play and subverts the traditional performer-spectator dynamic; Schechner describes the appeal of dark play for the performer by stating that it “emphasizes risk, deception, and sheer thrill.”⁷⁸ In order to achieve this thrill, however, there must by necessity be a group of outsiders- for example the unknowing spectators of the flash mob, over whom the hipster participants of the Mob Project can lord their insider status. Again from Schechner, “ these ‘non-knowing players’ - innocents, dupes, butts, victims- are essential to the playing.”⁷⁹ Using Todorov’s theory of the Fantastic, the effect of flash mob anonymity on these unknowing spectators can be analyzed.

The Fantastic theorizes a confrontation with an unknown quality that cannot be readily understood. More importantly, the unknown quality that engenders the Fantastic effect must also be at least unexpected and at most, using Rabkin’s scale, anti-expected- an event diametrically opposed to its real world context. While the actions of the Mob Project flash mobs were arguably most responsible for opposing the performances’ contexts, the anonymity between performer and spectator sets up an important opposition as well. In flash mob performance, the audience for the event is indistinguishable from the performers immediately before and immediately after the brief performance. The performers have a more complete understanding of the identity and nature of each individual in the performance space but even that understanding is imperfect; as flash mobs increase in size it becomes more and more difficult for the individual performer to spot their fellow performers before the event begins, a fact which could conceivably result in some tension and nervousness for the performer. Once the event does begin and all the performers are revealed, however, that complete understanding returns and the performer can

⁷⁸ Schechner *Performance Studies* 106

⁷⁹ Schechner *Performance Studies* 107

resolve any tension and nervousness that might exist into satisfaction at existing on the “inside” of the event as discussed above.

The spectators of flash mobs, on the other hand, have an incomplete understanding of the identity and nature of each individual in the performance space. Moreover, this understanding actually decreases throughout the event itself; the strange behavior of the performers has no framing around it to help identify it as performance and the exit of the performers at the event’s conclusion removes any chance the spectators have of confronting the unknown quality of the event and therefore resolving it in accordance with Todorov’s theory as either something Marvelous or something Uncanny. Without this resolution, the audience is in danger of being left within the experience of the Fantastic, an unnatural extension of Todorov’s effect that results in continued anxiety on the part of the spectator. In addition, the spectator for a flash mob performance has never agreed to serve as spectator; in fact, they may or may not be aware they are witnessing a performance at all, much less be in favor of witnessing said performance. This lack of agreement between spectator and performer is a result of the anonymity that exists between them. The primary role of the spectator according to Elam- the “ability to recognize the performance as such” and thus give permission to the performance- is undermined in flash mob performance, removing much spectatorial agency.⁸⁰ To summarize, the anonymity between spectator and performer in flash mobs erases an important element of the performance’s frame- the identity of the performer *as* performer- and delays or denies resolution of the performance for the spectator. This lack of resolution for the spectator manifests itself as the true *agon* or conflict contained within flash mob performance- the confrontation or potential confrontation between performer and spectator.

⁸⁰ Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. (London: Routledge, 1980) 97

Looking at this anonymity using Susan Bennett's notion of the two frames that govern audience reception, one sees not only the erasure of the inner frame of performance but also a potential confusion regarding the outer frame of community. This outer frame includes the audience's understanding of the performance's context and the behavior that belongs within that context. By erasing the frame that marks the performers as different from the spectators, the anonymity of flash mobs introduces doubt into the mind of the spectator regarding the identity of their social group. The flash mob's performers appear to be members of the same social group as the audience, existing within the same context and behaving in accordance with the same expected modes of behavior before the performance begins. When the performance begins, they are immediately marked as different by the audience but are not marked as performers (since there has been no metacommunication that frames them as such). When the performance ends and the performers disperse, retaining their anonymity, the audience is left to ponder the nature of those individuals remaining in the performance space- are they like me, the individual unaware spectator may wonder, or are they like them, the not-performers? By this, we see how the spectator is changed by their experience with the Fantastic. Bennett wrote:

[I]t is the tension between the inner frame of the fictional stage world, the audience's moment by moment perception of that in the experience of a social group, and the outer frame of community (cultural construction and horizons of expectations) which determine the nature and satisfaction of the interpretive process.⁸¹

⁸¹ Bennett 156

The act of witnessing the Mob Project events may have been pleasurable, but this alteration of both the inner and outer frames of performance- this dark, Fantastic play at work in flash mobs- must surely have been tense, unsettling experience as well.

To return to Wasik's notion of the non-performing spectator as unnecessary, Wasik's own writing on the audience response to the mobs aligns his findings with my own argument. He describes spectators as "terror-stricken" at one mob, as having "agape mouths" at another, and points out that the spectators were "confronted with a hundreds-strong armada of hipsters overhead...staring silently down" at a third.⁸² Blogs featured pictures of spectators looking confused and bewildered. This confrontation with spectators would have lost considerable dramatic power and pleasure if the flash mob had not been performed and organized anonymously.

There is another effect anonymity has on flash mob performance and, tangentially, reception: it makes legal action against the performers difficult. In most traditional theatrical production the fear of legal action is, generally speaking, a non-issue; theatres secure the rights to perform plays in advance of their production, they operate out of rented or owned spaces, and the relationship between performer and spectator is more or less clear. Flash mobs, on the other hand, take as their performance sites public and often commercial locations. They proceed to overload these spaces with the bodies of performers with no notice or explanation, disrupting the usual patterns of the space with incongruous action (I will examine the concepts of overloading and incongruous action later this chapter). The spectators for flash mobs are unaware of their role in the performance until it is well underway, if then- it is not uncommon for spectators at flash mobs to be completely unaware of what they are watching, a condition that was especially likely

⁸² Wasik "My Crowd" 66, *And Then* 30, and "My Crowd" 58

in Mob Project spectators. In addition, there is no agreement on the part of the spectators to *be* spectators- no ticket bought or plans made to attend a performance at a specific time and place- which leads to tension on the part of the spectator. All of these differences combine to create an event with a potentially high likelihood of invoking spectators into an antagonistic reaction against the performers with potential legal ramifications- an event in which conflict is experienced rather than performed and spectated. This was particularly true during the period of the Mob Project; since the events were so new and since the actions of the flash mobs changed each event, spectators struggled to recognize them as performances in the moment of performance, thus keeping tensions high.

According to Bill Wasik's *Harper's* article "My Crowd," the failed first attempt at a flash mob, Mob #1, was the only time the project ran into legal problems. However, this seems to be a blind spot for Wasik as multiple times throughout the article he mentions a police presence either preceding the event or directly following: he mentions that Mob #3 dispersed "just as the police cruisers were rolling up, flashers on," and in Mob #6 the police got far enough into the performance site to ask the performers to leave.⁸³ The plans for Mob #3 were in fact altered on the fly because of the presence of "National Guardsmen with machine guns" according to the email invite for Mob #4, though this authoritative presence had evidently been deployed for an unrelated event.⁸⁴ Underneath all of these encounters seems to be the shadow of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the fact that, in New York in 2003, a large gathering of anonymous people in a space not designed to accommodate them or their strange, incongruous actions must have seemed very threatening indeed.

⁸³ Wasik "My Crowd" 58 and 66

⁸⁴ <http://www.cheesebikini.com/2003/07/09/plans-for-the-fourth-manhattan-flash-mob/#more-83>

Bill Wasik could have removed anonymity entirely from the performance methodology of the Mob Project. By openly planning and performing the events, he could have completely eliminated the tension that surrounded the flash mobs and led in some cases to a police response. As the organizer, he had the most at stake in a potential legal action, a fact he admits in “My Crowd”: he muses that the “legality of the project remains a murky question...I suspect that I might have been found guilty of holding a demonstration without a permit, and could also have been liable for any damages done by the mob.”⁸⁵ Why make the choice to obscure the identities of the performers from each other and from the spectators? I think because Wasik knew that secrecy would increase the virality and attractiveness of the events to the hipster community. Flash mobs spread quickly worldwide during the course of the Mob Project in part because the “insider” nature of the events taps into the hipsters’ desire for transgressive behavior as well as the desire, particularly in young people, to join a group that excludes parents and authority figures. Howard Rheingold comments on this desire in regards to the explosive adoption of cell phones and texting among young people that happened just prior to the Mob Project:⁸⁶

the most obvious explanation for the key role of youth in the diffusion of mobile telephones and texting is that adolescents have adopted a medium that allows them to communicate with peers, outside the surveillance of parents and teachers, at the precise time in their lives when they are separating from their families and asserting their identities as members of a peer group.⁸⁷

In conclusion, then, it is not the involvement of the hipster youth subculture nor the use of technology that is vital to the performance methodology of flash mobs. Rather, it is the

⁸⁵ Wasik “My Crowd” 57

⁸⁶ <http://www.ctia.org/content/index.cfm/AID/11501>

⁸⁷ Rheingold 25.

connection between the two (and the by-product of that connection) that is vital to flash mob performance; the general state of anonymity between performer and spectator that partially enables the experience of the Fantastic.

The Second Commonality of Flash Mobs: Overloading and its Effect on the Spectator

To return to the name of the events in question, there is another definition of “flash” that is worth mentioning: “of or pertaining to thieves or prostitutes; spec. of thieves’ slang, cant.”⁸⁸ This usage, while archaic, is also apt. There are many words for the coded language employed by thieves and rogues of the 19th century and before- “argot,” “cant,” etc- but in 1848 an article appeared in the periodical *The Ladies Repository* detailing a secret criminal language called “Flash Language,” a specialized, technical vocabulary detailing the skill-set and technology necessary to the subversive elements of society.⁸⁹ This slang developed along with the rapid growth of urban areas and, like the more obviously dangerous cant language, served as a linguistic distinction between classes. The difference was flash became popular with middle to lower class non-criminal elements through pamphlets and pulp fiction, and so was co-opted into cultural areas it was not meant for; flash “occupied the area between the classes . . . cant respected class, in that its speakers knew not to use it outside its proper sphere; flash had no such respect. Thus flash language was, for users of any class, an expression of defiance.”⁹⁰

This defiance is a key part of the other attributed source for the flash mob name, the work of Larry Niven. Niven’s 1973 short story “Flash Crowd” details a world in the process of

⁸⁸ “Flash.” Adj. def. 1a. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. 5th ed. Vol 1 2002.

⁸⁹ Coleman, Julie. *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries Volume II 1785-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 242.

⁹⁰ Coleman 260

embracing inexpensive long-range teleportation technology as a mass-transit system. The result is the occasional “flash crowd”- a near riot caused by too many people teleporting at the same time to a public space. In “Flash Crowd” (and in the other Niven stories and novels in which he postulates the effects of teleportation on cultural norms), these crowds are always associated with criminal or aberrant behavior- from minor rule-bending such as teleporting ahead of the international dateline in an effort to keep a birthday celebration going to more serious and potentially dangerous events such as drug legalization protests, shoplifting, and mob violence.⁹¹

Bill Wasik had noticed this defiance but could not reconcile it with the apolitical nature of the flash mob as he saw it. He described it in “My Crowd” as follows:

There was, however, one successful element of politics in the flash mob- a vague and dark thing, a purely chaotic impulse that (surprisingly enough, for a fad born of the Internet) was tinged almost with Luddism. It could best be seen at the very moment that a mob came together: a sort of fundamental joy at seeing society overtaken, order stymied; at silently infiltrating this pseudopublic space, this corporate space, these chain stores and shopping malls, and then rising at once to overrun them.⁹²

This quote provides useful insight into flash mob performance methodology; it paints a picture of anarchy in a confined and established space. I’ve already dealt with phrases like “silently infiltrating” and “rising at once,” which speak to the anonymous relationship between performer and spectator discussed above. I will return to “order stymied” and “corporate space”

⁹¹ In Niven’s story “The Last Days of the Permanent Floating Riot Club,” a criminal organization is created specifically to take advantage of the conditions created by a “flash crowd,” which results in a sort of police force being created to combat it. In Niven’s novel *Ringworld*, Louis Wu artificially extends his birthday by 24 hours by constantly teleporting ahead of the midnight line.

⁹² Wasik “My Crowd” 65

shortly. For now, the phrases I'd like to focus on are the ones connected to the "mob" aspect of flash mobs- "society overtaken" and "to overrun." One of the central rules Bill Wasik created for his Mob Project was that he would take any steps necessary to increase participation in and awareness of the events.⁹³ This means not only was he concerned for the virality of the flash mob at large but also the physical footprint of each individual flash mob event. The end result of this concern for growth is the overloading of a performance site with human bodies, the "Slashdot effect" or a DoS attack in real space. The "Slashdot effect," or "slashdotting," refers to an internet traffic spike caused by the news website Slashdot.org linking to a smaller site; this often causes the smaller site to crash. Bill Wasik mentioned the similarity between flash mobs and "slashdotting" in *And Then There's This*. A DoS attack is a denial-of-service attack against a server or other networked machine; the attack attempts to overload the target with so many false requests that it makes the target inoperable for those users who are attempting to use it for its intended purpose. This notion of "intended purpose" and the denial of that purpose is vital to my analysis of flash mob performance methodology, so this is the metaphor that I believe is more apt. In "My Crowd," Wasik admitted that he choose performance sites too small to accommodate the size of the flash mobs in order to make the mobs appear more powerful- "only in enclosed spaces could the mob generate the necessary self-awe; to allow the mob to feel small would have destroyed it."⁹⁴ While Wasik focused on the effect this choice had on the performers, the effect it had on spectators is even more important in identifying commonalities in flash mob performance methodology and reception; overloading the performance space distorts the distance between spectator and performance, enhancing the experience of the Fantastic begun through the use of anonymity.

⁹³ Wasik *And Then* 28

⁹⁴ Wasik *And Then* 66

Before examining how this overloading affects reception and the audience's experience of the Fantastic it is necessary to examine the concept of distance. The first theorist to attempt to describe distance as a factor in 20th century audience reception was Edward Bullough. In Bullough's 1912 article "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle" he explains his key concept, psychical distance, through a metaphor of being lost in the fog at sea. Bullough describes how, for most, being lost in the fog "is apt to produce feelings of peculiar anxiety, fears of invisible dangers, strains of watching and listening for distant and unlocalised signals."⁹⁵ This description does not seem so different from what I theorize to be the experience of the Mob Project spectator, anxiously attempting to find the framing that would allow for successful interpretation of the performance but prevented by the anonymity of the performer. Bullough goes on to suggest that if one could be removed somehow from the direct experience of the fog one could appreciate its more enjoyable qualities- the calming solitude it provides, the heightening of the other senses, the abstract shapes made by its movement over the water. This removal is psychical distance, and it is this distance that makes the appreciation of performance possible. If a theatrical audience member truly believed the events onstage were happening they would be unable to merely sit and observe; the various murders and unpleasant bits of stage business would activate the audience's fight or flight instinct, causing fear or violence. As Bullough explained, we as spectators are only able to enjoy the performance (or any work of art)...

...by putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends - in short, by looking at it 'objectively,' as it has often been called, by permitting only

⁹⁵ Bullough, Edward. "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle." *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*. Ed. by Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) 245

such reactions on our part as emphasize the 'objective' features of the experience, and by interpreting even our 'subjective' affections not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon.⁹⁶

Daphna Ben Chaim expanded on this notion of distance with a focus on performance in her 1984 book *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response*. Here Chaim argued that distance in its varying degrees and combinations directly affects audience engagement and is therefore a contributing factor to theatrical style; realism, for example, has a reduced distance in that the audience is emotionally engaged in the reality of the stage world with relatively little separation between the fictional world and the real world of the spectator.⁹⁷ To put it in terms of Schechner's restored village example from Chapter 1, in realism the three frames are almost aligned- only the innermost frame is still offset due to the audience's awareness that they are, in fact, witnessing a fiction. This awareness is distance, and according to Chaim there can be no art or aesthetic response to art without it.

Chaim also sets up a basic formula for the establishment and variability of distance:

[T]he combination...of unreality with recognizable human characteristics seem to be the minimum requirement for identification, and both of these conditions are variable and provide the borders within which distance operates. Those qualities that make the object seem like ourselves (humanization) pull the object toward us; those aspects which distinguish the object from ourselves and our real world (an awareness of fictionality) push the object away from us. The aesthetic tension between those two opposing tendencies constitutes distance.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Bullough 246

⁹⁷ Chaim, Dapha Ben. *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984)

⁹⁸ Chaim 67

In a way, this description sounds a bit like the aesthetic response that is provoked by the Fantastic. The experience of the Fantastic exists as a tension between what the spectators recognize as real or “like ourselves” and what the spectators reject as unlike ourselves. In the Fantastic, however, distance cannot be accurately established because the fictionality of the intruding event is in question; what is believed to be fictional threatens to become real, resulting in a spectator that is unable to establish and maintain an aesthetic distance. The individual encountering the event experiences the hesitation of the Fantastic precisely for this reason.

The overloading of the performance space enhances the experience of the Fantastic for flash mob audiences because it manages to send conflicting signals about distance. This confusion of signals manifests in two distinct ways. First, it reduces the distance between performance and spectator by surrounding the spectator with anonymous, seemingly ‘real’ people. In multiple Mob Project events the size of the performing mob is mentioned as being superior to the size of the potential spectator pool. This is by design; Wasik mentions choosing locations remote or unused to large attendance, like the rug department of Mob #2 or the side door of St. Patrick’s in Mob #7. However, even when well-frequented locations were chosen (like the Times Square Toys R Us in Mob #6), the performance sites are small enough and specific enough to overwhelm the spectators with sheer numbers. This was no doubt a wise choice on the part of a director who does not know for sure the size of his cast and for whom outnumbering the spectators and overloading the performance site is central to the success of the event. It begs the question: if Wasik had known for sure the size of his mobs, would he have chosen more open and more populous locations, as bloggers often requested of him?⁹⁹ Wasik suggests this might be the case in a footnote to “My Crowd,” referring to a “Nuclear Option”

⁹⁹ Wasik “My Crowd” 64

version of the Mob Project that would utilize hundreds of thousands of performers in order to overwhelm even the most open of spaces.¹⁰⁰

In any case, the overloading of space by anonymous performers reduces the distance that usually separates art from real life by introducing questions of scale and expectation. If a Broadway musical is sparsely attended, the spectators do not feel tension when the hundred-performer-strong chorus enters because that meets their expectations; they may feel awkward that they outnumber the performers but that I would argue is a different kind of anxiety than the anxiety the Fantastic provides. In contrast, a flash mob performance spectator has no expectations because they have no understanding that they are a spectator. If the flash mob had a single performer it would be easier to identify the event as either a performance or as the actions of a single, potentially disturbed individual. It is the sheer scale of the participation that introduces doubt; perhaps the rules and expectations of the performance- the normal patterns of behavior that the spectator obeys- have actually been overthrown or altered without the spectator's knowledge?

Reducing the distance between spectator and performance even more is the provoking of the fight-or-flight instinct that is achieved by overloading spaces. The overloading of space creates its own sense of danger; it calls to mind for the individual audience member horrific images of spectators being trampled at a sporting event or buildings collapsing due to an excess of bodies. This type of threat is very real when the occupancy of space exceeds the purpose for which it was built. As Chaim illustrated earlier, audiences are drawn to "low" distance performances, objects and events that seem "like us." In flash mobs the audience is surrounded by anonymous individuals who literally overrun the space and deviate from established patterns

¹⁰⁰ Wasik "My Crowd" 64

of behavior for that space. Nonetheless, this behavior seems potentially authentic because it is not framed in any other way that would separate it from the spectator. This leads to the creation of a fictional world (the flash mob performance) that is noticeably unreal only because of the incongruous but seemingly authentic behavior it contains. This results in a performance with a bare minimum of distance from the audience, a performance in which the frames of reception almost completely align. The spectator is drawn to the flash mob in the same moment that it is repulsed by the fear of an overabundance of bodies in a space too small for them. This leads to a hesitation in response that exists alongside the hesitation of the Fantastic; it is the anonymity of the performer working in conjunction with the overloading of the performance space that achieves this unique aesthetic effect.

Many participants of the Mob Project speculated that the flash mob form could be used in more “meaningful” ways. Multiple bloggers involved in the Mob Project offered advice on how to use flash mob performance methodology for political ends, how to stage a flash mob as a more identifiable piece of performance art, and even how to hack an existing flash mob into a protest. After multiple flash mobs in different cities chose Toys R Us stores as performance sites, Sean Savage at cheesebikini warned potential flash mob organizers:

Consider steering clear of the large corporate retail stores; these places get enough business as it is. Participants: remember that **a corporation could easily create fake flash mobs** designed to spur more business to its retail outlets. Don’t be a sheep! Consider the consequences before following any flash mob instructions. Avoid purchases during, after, or on the way to a flash mob.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ <http://www.cheesebikini.com/category/flash-mobs/>. Emphasis is original.

To me, this warning indicates not only a desire on the part of participants to keep flash mobs “authentic” but an understanding on some level of the reduced distance between spectator and performance that flash mobs provide; a complete reduction of distance could result in an alignment of spectator and performer, an alignment that could be used for political or commercial ends (as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4). However, it is the third commonality of flash mob performance that ensures that some amount of distance, however small, remains within flash mob performance and reception- the commonality of incongruity.

The Third Commonality of Flash Mobs: Incongruity and its Effect on the Spectator

Putting aside the technological and subversive elements attached to the etymology of the word “flash,” “flash” no doubt also referred to the performances’ durations. The email invitations for the Mob Project specify in the first paragraph that the project “creates an inexplicable mob of people in New York City for ten minutes or less.”¹⁰² Many of the initial instructions also give precise timing for arrival and departure, often specifying in all capital letters something similar to “NO ONE SHOULD REMAIN AT THE MOB SITE MORE THAN TWO MINUTES AFTER THE MOB IS OVER.”¹⁰³ This dispersal is a common element among all Mob Project events and flash mobs since. When connected with the anonymity established earlier it makes sense; it is difficult to remain anonymous if one remains at the performance site. Dispersal as a large group also returns the space to its established patterns and previous occupancy, removing the overloaded status of the site.

¹⁰² Wasik *And Then* 5

¹⁰³ <http://www.cheesebikini.com/2003/06/26/upcoming-flash-mobs/#more-75>

Is this brevity and dispersal a crucial component of flash mob performance methodology and reception during and since the Mob Project? I would argue no. Brevity helps maintain anonymity but it does not establish it. More importantly, while brevity has a huge impact on the live performance, for post-Mob Project flash mobs the larger audience is the YouTube audience; the meaning of duration begins to shift when one looks at mediated spectatorship, which I will begin doing in Chapter 3. Brevity also invites qualification which I feel is counterproductive to establishing a performance methodology that accounts for the wild variety that still exists within the flash mob performance - “how brief is brief enough” is an arbitrary question that may be useful for judging effectiveness and quality (both factors in reception) but is not a useful criteria for evaluating methodology. Still, the fact that all Mob Project events adhered to strict regulations on length means that there is some quality related to brevity that *is* critical to flash mob performance. That quality is the performance of incongruous action and its connection to the limited duration of Todorov’s Fantastic effect.

Each of the six successfully performed flash mobs in the Mob Project (mobs #2-7) required their performers to focus on a single unifying action or set of actions: asking for a “love rug” as part of a commune in Mob #2, applauding nothing in Mob #3, behaving like tourists in a shoe store in Mob #4, making strange animal noises in Central Park in Mob #5, worshipping a toy Tyrannosaurus in Mob #6, and attempting to buy concert tickets at a church in Mob #7. If one was to distill the unifying principal of the action of all these flash mobs, it would be that their performed actions were all incongruous to their performance sites.

This incongruous action creates two distinct but related effects in reception. First, it contributes to the experience of the Fantastic in the spectator. Todorov’s Fantastic requires an encounter with an event appears to break the rules of its real world context. Furthermore, as

Rabkin explained, the more that event diametrically opposes expectations the more powerful the Fantastic effect is that the audience experiences. While the Mob Project events did not always reach the fullest expression of the Fantastic on Rabkin's scale (the anti-expected), all of the flash mobs could have achieved the Fantastic effect due to the subversion of expectations by the performances' actions. It is worth noting that this subversion of expectations is directly connected to the performance site and the audience's cultural expectations of what is acceptable behavior within that site; an audience member who truly believed in the holiness of Toys R Us and the divinity of the animatronic T-Rex being worshipped in Mob #6 would experience no Fantastic effect whatsoever.

Similarly, incongruous action breaks the established patterns of spaces only when it is performed with brevity. Todorov's Fantastic is a measure of hesitation; it exists only from the moment of confrontation with the incongruous event to the decision made by the character or spectator regarding the nature of that event. For this reason, I argue that flash mobs excel at creating the Fantastic in their audiences because they are, by design, extremely short. Taking Mob #7 (the buying of rock concert tickets at the side door of a church) as an example, if this flash mob had been performed for a longer period of time it seems likely that the reception of the event would have changed. The initial effect on the spectator is one that corresponds with the Fantastic- confusion, fear, and fascination. However, as the event becomes more familiar, the spectator is forced to draw conclusions about the event- perhaps it is a publicity stunt or perhaps the church really is selling concert tickets, introducing a new, permanent or semi-permanent pattern to the space. The spectator then resolves their hesitation concerning the event which confronts them and leaves the Fantastic; the flash mob, despite the anonymity of the performers

and the overloading of the space, shifts from a mysterious performance event to an event the spectator has definitively categorized as either Marvelous or Uncanny.

The second effect on reception created by the incongruous action of flash mobs is that it is the only framing device contained within the performance. The performers are anonymous and their sheer numbers suggest authenticity as discussed above, but the incongruity of the flash mob's action- the way in which it subverts the established and expected patterns of the space- draws attention to itself. Here and nowhere else in the performance of flash mobs is Bateson's metacommunicative whisper "This is play." However, this whisper is complicated by the anonymity of the performers (which erases much of the rest what framing might exist) and by the nature of these incongruous actions. Much like the Happenings, flash mob performance actions tend towards the everyday and immediately recognizable- applauding, standing in line, taking pictures. They are incongruous not in themselves but in contrast to their context. While Kaprow's gallery context encouraged spectators to view the everyday actions of the Happenings as art in much the same way as they might view and interpret Duchamp's readymades, the context for the Mob Project events gives the spectator no such interpretive assistance. The applauding of Mob #3 cannot be interpreted fully as performance because while it contrasts with the hotel lobby in which it occurs it matches absent but remembered contexts- it is, after all, restored behavior for the spectator as well as for the performer.

One is left, then, with three commonalities that define the Mob Project performances: the anonymity between performer and spectator, the overloading of the performance site, and the performance of incongruous action. The spectator's confrontation of an event with these commonalities develops into hesitation and tension that is best explained by Todorov's theory of the Fantastic. The incongruity of the performers' actions alerts spectators that something unusual

is happening but doesn't explain what; they are left to puzzle out the event without the context clues of performer identity, all the while noticing how many other individuals they previously assumed to be just like them are actually in on whatever is occurring. Then, before the spectator can fully process these elements, the performance ends, the performers disperse, the normal patterns of the space reemerge, and the spectator is left to process their encounter with the Fantastic and draw conclusions as they may. This pattern provides a guide to analyze not only the performance methodology and reception of the Mob Project performance but all flash mob performances after. This is not to say that this methodology is sacrosanct or unalterable. Like any dramatic form, post-Mob Project flash mobs play with these three elements to achieve slightly different effects. However, if these three elements are not contained in a performance event to a greater or lesser degree, then based on my analysis that event would cease to be a flash mob and become a different sort of mob-based performance, such as those of the New York prankster performance organization Improv Everywhere.

Comparing Flash Mob Performance Methodology and Reception to the Performances of Improv Everywhere

While the three commonalities of flash mob performance- the anonymity between performer and spectator, the overloading of the performance site, and the performance of incongruous action- can be found in other performance styles centered on mobilizing large groups of performers, they do not always define these styles in the same way they define flash mob performance. What *does* connect other mob-based performances with flash mobs

specifically is the experience of the Fantastic that they can engender in their audiences. Nowhere can this be better demonstrated than in the work of Improv Everywhere.

Improv Everywhere is a New York based organization specializing in mob-based performance art. I take them as my case study for mob-based performance that does not correspond directly with flash mob methodology for a number of reasons. First of all, Bill Wasik's Mob Project and the earliest performances of Improv Everywhere share a similar time and space: New York in the early 2000's. Second, Improv Everywhere's performances have been described as "flash mobs," a claim with which they and I disagree. Third, while Improv Everywhere showcases a wide variety of performance styles and methodologies, the effect many of their performances create in their audiences is Fantastical in the sense of Todorov; they force the audience to question their reality through the confrontation between performer and spectator.

Founded in 2001 by Charlie Todd, Improv Everywhere took its inspiration in part from the Upright Citizens Brigade; Todd was taking improvisation classes at the Upright Citizen Brigade Theatre at the time of the first Improv Everywhere mission and so he borrowed their terminology to describe both the pranks he organized ("missions") and the performers involved ("agents").¹⁰⁴ Pre-dating the first of the Wasik mobs, Improv Everywhere now goes to great length to distance itself from flash mobs, even including a lengthy discussion of why Improv Everywhere missions aren't flash mobs on their official FAQ:

Aren't these flash mobs?

No. Improv Everywhere was created about 2 years before the first "flash mob."

While some of our missions may have certain similarities to a flash mob (large numbers of people engaging in a coordinated activity in a public place), we have

¹⁰⁴ Todd, Charlie, and Alex Scordelis. *Causing a Scene: Extraordinary Pranks in Ordinary Places with Improv Everywhere*. (New York: William Morrow, 2009), 4

never embraced that term. Some missions use just a few folks while others might use thousands, depending on what suits the idea. Also, our projects are rarely over in a flash. Many last for hours.

Over the years the term “flash mob” has been beaten to death by the media and co-opted by marketers. It’s become a lazy, catch-all term to describe things as varied as people dancing at a Black Eyed Peas concert to surprise Oprah Winfrey to teens meeting up to commit crimes in Chicago. I’m not sure what it even means anymore, and I don’t really care to use it to describe what we do.¹⁰⁵

As discussed in the Introduction, this overuse of the term “flash mob” is one of this dissertation’s driving forces. However, while many of Todd’s objections to the term are accurate, it doesn’t follow that there is nothing to be gained from attempting to apply it to Improv Everywhere’s performance style. Utilizing the three characteristics of flash mob performance methodology as criteria- the anonymity between performer and spectator, the overloading of the performance site, and the performance of incongruous action- a quick scan of Improv Everywhere’s performance history eliminates many of their missions from being considered flash mobs. Anonymity between performers and audience is compromised on multiple levels; the agents are generally either in on the creation of the mission or briefed about it beforehand, and the increased length of the missions (often well over ten minutes) compared to flash mobs results in any anonymity being most likely compromised before the performance is over. Overloading is likewise compromised; Improv Everywhere missions vary in the number of agents used, but the first year and a half of the group’s existence- the pre-flash mob period composed of twenty-two missions including the inaugural “Ben Folds’ Last Night in Town: Parts One and Two”- were

¹⁰⁵ <http://improveverywhere.com/faq/>

relatively small affairs usually involving less than ten agents. However, it is worth stating that one third of those twenty-two missions were staged on the subway; ten agents plus passengers is potentially enough to overload the confined space of a New York subway train. All of the missions do involve incongruous action in some fashion. Improvisation relies on unconventional action or unexpected reaction for its success so it is not noteworthy that Improv Everywhere should employ incongruity for comedic effect. What is noteworthy are the amount of times this incongruous action results in hostile reactions from spectators, and since it is the tension born of Fantastic encounters that inspires these hostile reactions and connects the performances most closely to flash mobs it is there that I will focus.

In the 2009 book *Causing a Scene: Extraordinary Pranks in Ordinary Places with Improv Everywhere*, Charlie Todd writes in the “Foreword”:

As we got better and better at pulling them [the missions] off we realized we had stumbled onto a new idea: pranks that didn’t need a victim. It was very easy to cause a scene by getting into some type of argument or conflict...it was much more challenging to come up with ideas that actually gave the people we encountered a good experience.¹⁰⁶

While this sets Todd’s intent apart from Wasik’s satirical intent for the Mob Project, Todd’s distinguishing between “victim” and “audience” is less straight-forward than it might initially appear. I read his statement to mean that, in his estimation, the missions performed by Improv Everywhere do not specifically target individuals unaffiliated with the group for ridicule or humiliation the way other pranks might. Like Wasik’s undervaluing of the unaffiliated spectator, however, Todd’s analysis shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the form he

¹⁰⁶ Todd VII

helped pioneer. The most flash mob-esque of Improv Everywhere's missions rely on the confrontation between spectator and performer born of the audience's experience of the Fantastic for their success and virality.

One of Improv Everywhere's most popular "series" of missions (missions with similar performance styles and tactics) are the "No Pants" subway missions. First attempted in early 2002, these missions involve a number of agents riding a subway without wearing their pants. They are not naked, it is important to note, and often the mission involves them taking off their pants in one subway car and then entering another car pants-less. The agents do not acknowledge the fact that they are performing as per usual with Improv Everywhere missions; it is mentioned repeatedly in mission descriptions, the online FAQ, and *Causing a Scene* that the first job of Improv Everywhere agents is to remain in character until the return to *relative* anonymity that ends the performance.¹⁰⁷ The "No Pants" missions have become an annual and international event and have been featured on the Today show, David Letterman, This American Life, and an unaired 20/20 segment; these missions are arguably the ones for which Improv Everywhere is best known.

The description of the first "No Pants" mission, posted on the website in 2002, contextualizes the goals of the mission in a similar fashion to the quoted "Foreword," reasoning that "in improvisation, 'agreement' makes for a far more interesting scene than 'argument'."¹⁰⁸ However, the description of the mission found on the website prominently features an argument that occurred between members of the audience and agents of Improv Everywhere. A couple of men (which the website identifies as Gay Lover 1 and 2, or GL 1 and 2) on the train begin heckling the agents as they ride, telling them to "Get a life" and "Maybe in the 60's or 70's it

¹⁰⁷ Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ <http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/>

would have been funny, but today...it's embarrassing."¹⁰⁹ At that point, two women (Woman 1 and 2, or W1 and 2) enter the conversation:

W2: These people [GL1 and GL2] need to lighten up!

GL1: Watch your wallet! It's so stupid.

GL2: It's asinine.

GL1: It's annoying. You want to relax on the train and then this happens...

Todd: I'm sorry.

GL2: ...and the cops will come out...

GL1: The cops will know about this.

Todd: What did I do wrong?

GL2: It's a public place. It's a quality of life issue.

GL1: It's a public nuisance!¹¹⁰

Woman 1 then compares the event to a Happening, and the four audience members proceed to have a discussion about whether the subway train is an appropriate place for art. After seventeen minutes, the Improv Everywhere agents leave the train and the mission ends.

At the end of the mission description on the website Todd points out that they achieved the goal of the mission: "a bit of live comedy through agreement."¹¹¹ However, he also foregrounds the conflict with GL 1 and 2, praising the agents for remaining in character and making GL1 "the star of the scene...We could not have created a better character than GL1 if we had scripted it."¹¹² This mission became the blueprint for every "No Pants" mission after it and many of them also resulted in similar confrontations. The 2003 mission involved accusations of

¹⁰⁹ <http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/>

¹¹⁰ <http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/>

¹¹¹ <http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/>

¹¹² <http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/>

perversion, homosexuality, and attempted harassment in addition to moral outrage, while 2004 and 2005 featured more sexual harassment and the threat of physical violence. It was not until the 2006 mission that the police got involved.¹¹³ An officer noticed the mission while the train was stopped at a platform. He pulled the train out of service, forcing all passengers to disembark and wait for the next train. He called for backup, leading to a congregation of nearly twenty-five police officers and the arrest of eight agents under the charge of “Disorderly Conduct.” They were eventually released, but the arrest and the press attention that followed it led to the event gaining an official police escort for 2007, 2008, and sporadically after, organized without the prior knowledge of Improv Everywhere- according to Todd, “it was as if we were a parade.”¹¹⁴

These “No Pants” missions were met with perhaps the most serious legal response to the confrontation between performer and spectator, but other Improv Everywhere missions resulted in similar consequences. For example, 2005’s “Even Better Than the Real Thing” mission ended with multiple agents handcuffed and given summons to appear in court on charges of “unreasonable noise,” and 2006’s “Best Buy” mission also garnered a police presence but did not result in arrests or charges.¹¹⁵ I choose to focus on these responses because they demonstrate one potential result of Fantastic tension: in flash mobs and other mob-based performances, there is a very real chance that the conflict between performer and spectator that makes these events so interesting to watch will develop into dangerous repercussions for performer, spectator, or both.

The manipulation of this conflict for the sake of virality eventually causes flash mob performance methodology to shrink from the inclusion of various disparate styles to one

¹¹³ <http://improveverywhere.com/2006/01/22/no-pants-2k6/>

¹¹⁴ Todd 35

¹¹⁵ Derived from various locations on <http://improveverywhere.com/>

dominant form; it is this manipulation and resulting homogeny that I will focus on in the next chapter.

Chapter 3-

Performing the Fantastic: Dance Mobs and the YouTube Audience

To restate the conclusions of Chapter 2, an event must meet three criteria in order to be considered a flash mob. First, the event must overload the physical space in which it occurs. By this I mean the event must involve a sufficient amount of participants in order to exceed the established patterns of that space. It follows that one of the degrees by which one may measure the success of a flash mob performance is the magnitude of the overloading. By way of a hypothetical example, nine players showing up at the same time in a baseball diamond does not overload the space because it follows an established pattern with which the non-participants (the audience) are familiar. If twelve players show up at the same time, the audience may or may not be aware that something is different. However, if twenty-nine players show up at the same time in a baseball diamond with multiple players at each position, this overloads the diamond, breaking the established pattern of the space and communicating to the audience that what they are watching is something different than a baseball game.

Second, the event must repurpose the space through the performance of incongruous action. By this I mean the event must introduce an action into the space for which the space was not expressly designed. This incongruous repurposing can exist on multiple levels; the overloading of the space can itself be an incongruity, as can the action of the event, as can the synchronicity of the event's performance- its sudden beginning and ending, the simultaneous performance of the action of the mob, etc. The degree to which the action of the performance is alien to the performance site is another measure of its effectiveness. In the baseball example above, while the number of participants marks it as something different to the audience, the fact

that the participants are still baseball players confuses and dilutes the effect. The space is expressly designed for baseball and therefore their appearance is not incongruous even if their number is. If twenty-nine football players show up, the audience will notice the difference but perhaps not the incongruity- after all, many professional football and baseball teams share the same stadium and the connection between baseball and football as sporting events is obvious. However, if twenty-nine pregnant women show up and begin to go into labor, the audience will immediately realize that the action is incongruous to the space.

Third, the event must contain an element of anonymity between performer and spectator. By this I mean that the chorus of flash mob performers must be indistinguishable from the spectators in the time both before and after the performance. The degree to which this anonymity is successfully maintained is yet another measure of the flash mob's effectiveness. To return to the previous example of twenty-nine pregnant women on a baseball field, if these women are carefully arranged along the sidelines in plain sight of the audience prior to the performance, then the anonymity and the effectiveness of the flash mob are greatly reduced; the spectators who are there to see the baseball game can draw conclusions about what the women are there for before the performance begins. If, however, the pregnant women come from the stands, begin going into labor, and then quickly exit into the stadium seats, losing themselves in the crowd, then the spectators have almost no time to draw conclusions about what they have witnessed. The result of these three qualities in performance is the audience's experience of the Fantastic. The degree to which this aesthetic effect is experienced by the spectator is a direct measure of the performance's effectiveness- the more successfully the three commonalities are achieved, the greater the experience of the Fantastic.

For the duration of the Mob Project, the effectiveness of any given flash mob performance is a question that could only be answered by two audiences- the performer and the spectator. If one could theorize a third type of spectator for flash mobs- one that belongs neither to the performer group nor the spectator group but that can watch both groups interact at a distance from the event itself- that spectator would be unable to discern the performers from the spectators without feeling threatened by the anonymity, overloading, and incongruous action. Therefore, they would be able to enjoy the loss of framing that accompanies flash mob performance to potentially the same degree as the performers. This third spectator would have greater distance from the performance and therefore almost certainly experience the Fantastic to a lesser degree. Would this shift in reception undermine the viability of flash mob performance? Or would the form adapt to take advantage of this new type of spectator? It is this third spectator, the at-home spectator, to which I will now turn my attention. Shortly after the conclusion of the Mob Project a new internet start-up helped create this third spectator for flash mob performance. The start-up was the video-sharing website YouTube, and by allowing the at-home audience to experience flash mob performance it introduced the idea of virality as a goal and measure of effectiveness for flash mob performances.

YouTube, Memes, and Genres of Flash Mobs

YouTube went live in February 2005 though it did not officially open for business until later that year. Even so, it was a massive success in terms of participation and traffic; by November of 2005 YouTube was responsible for the distribution of 8 terabytes of video every 24

hours.¹¹⁶ By mid-2006 YouTube users were uploading over 65,000 new videos to the site daily.¹¹⁷ The success of YouTube was a result of multiple factors- the mass adoption of cellular telephones with video capture capability, an increase in access to broadband internet, and YouTube's streamlining of the video uploading process. In addition to being the third most popular website destination in 2013 after Google and Facebook, YouTube also allowed users to share specific videos with other potential users through the use of imbedded links, email, or social media. It is this functionality that helped certain videos reach extreme levels of visibility, audience familiarity and access- in other words, attain virality.

YouTube allowed flash mobs to reach a different audience- the at-home, mediated audience, a potentially much larger audience than the group of live spectators who happened to be in the performance space when the flash mob began. Flash mob videos uploaded to YouTube in its early days exhibited strong similarities to the Mob Project-era events. As an example, I will briefly analyze one such early flash mob video: "Pillow Fight Club - San Francisco," uploaded to YouTube on March 6th, 2006. The performance captured in this recording displays the three characteristics of flash mob performance methodology discussed last chapter. First of all, it is clearly overloading the space; despite the performance taking place in a large, open-air plaza, the performance site appears completely full of hundreds of performers, a fact communicated to the at-home audience through a camera pan from left to right. Second, the flash mob takes as its single, simple action a pillow fight, an action recognizably incongruous to the space not only by the contrast between the interior, intimate nature of the action and the exterior, urban space of the performance but also by the sheer number of participants. Despite its incongruity, the action itself is commonplace, easily recognized as restored behavior but less easily identified as

¹¹⁶ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1990787,00.html>

¹¹⁷ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/techinnovations/2005-11-21-video-websites_x.htm

performance. Third, the use of anonymity between performer and spectator. This is difficult to establish definitively on video, but certain videographic choices communicate anonymity to the at-home audience quite effectively. For example, the “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco” video is shot from a single camera POV with no visible editing of any kind. In addition, the video does not capture the event in its entirety; the audience does not see the entrance of the chorus of performers nor their exit from the space, nor is there any kind of suggestion given to the at-home audience of the performance site’s established patterns beyond what can be reasonably determined through an observation of the buildings surrounding the performance. The video’s length (0:24 seconds), quality (shaky and often out of focus), and the time period in which it was uploaded to YouTube (2006) suggest that it was shot with a cell phone camera. One can see spectators wading into and retreating from the action of the flash mob as well as live spectators taking pictures and video with their own cell phones. These factors combined with the constant laughter and audible reaction (“Oh my God,” “I love it,” etc) from an unseen spectator (potentially the cameraperson themselves) suggest that the event was a surprise, communicating anonymity to the at-home audience. I will return to some of these factors later in the chapter; for now, let “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco” serve as an example of the length and type of flash mobs that at-home audiences had access to in the first few years of YouTube’s existence.

As mentioned in the Introduction, flash mobs are a type of meme. I place them in the same category as other memes that occupy physical space in order to achieve a viral outcome—memes like planking, Tebowing, and owling. One might call these memes physical or spatial memes, requiring as they do the performance of physical action in physical space. It is the word “performance” that is central to their definition; while physical action is also required to create a

purely digital meme there is no element of performance in the creation of meme itself.¹¹⁸ For example, compare the two different popular memes- planking and Sad Keanu. Planking is the act of laying across a portion of an environment- the ground, furniture, other people, etc- facedown with one's body rigid, as if one was a plank of wood. In this meme, the performer's physical body is altering the landscape of the performance site in an incongruous way at the time of his performance. "Sad Keanu" is a meme in which a picture of actor Keanu Reeves sitting on a park bench and looking sad is digitally inserted into other pictures in order to comment on the subject of the other picture. While Reeves did perform a physical action at the time the original photo of him was taken, it is not his performance which enables the meme to function; it is his digital insertion into incongruous circumstances that makes the meme appealing. It is important to note that both spatial and digital memes rely on incongruity to achieve their effect, one of the reasons that I connect flash mobs to memes.

A spatial meme has three stages of existence: 1) physical enactment or performance, 2) digital dissemination, and 3) physical reenactment. In other words: 1) the performer performs the action or behavior which comprises the meme and is photographed or recorded in their performance, 2) the photograph or video is shared online, where it has the potential to be massively accessed and re-shared, thus achieving virality, and 3) spectators who see the record of the performance are inspired to create their own variation on the meme, connecting to the original by recreating or restoring the action or behavior that makes up the meme. The second two phases comprise the cycle of virality so crucial to the survival of any meme. Both digital and spatial memes are similar in that the initial enactment becomes dramatically less important once

¹¹⁸ This is, of course, a slight oversimplification. In the creation of a purely digital meme there is the performance of restored behavior, there is the potential for the performance of self or the performance of a cultural role, and there is the more mundane definition of performance from the OED- "the execution of accomplishment of an action, operation, or process undertaken or ordered."

the third stage is reached and the cycle of virality begins. For many memes the initial enactment is completely indistinguishable from the reenactments; for some, the initial enactment was not even recorded, therefore skipping the second stage, digital dissemination, entirely in the first cycle. In this way, memes in general share another characteristic with flash mobs- the relative anonymity of the performer.

I separate spatial memes into two sub-categories- Simple Action Memes and Complex Action Memes. Simple Action Memes are spatial memes that leave very little room for alteration in performance style. These memes rely on instant recognizability; if the audience cannot tell that the action being performed belongs in the same category as other iterations of the meme then the effect is lessened. This focus on simple, easily repeatable action increases their performance potential; Simple Action Memes are arguably more democratic in this way as they require little preparation and no special skills to perform, like planking. However, this increased performance potential comes at the cost of potentially decreased repetition potential. Performers must hew closely to the "original" performance to maximize recognizability. Because of this restriction, the arc for the performer of these memes is actually somewhat flat; these Simple Action Memes can be fully experienced by the performer in a single attempt, especially as the climax, as it were, of these memes comes in the digital dissemination and following attempt at virality rather than the moment of performance itself. This leads to a lot of single occasion performers, which is why effective virality (continuously reaching more and more first time spectators to ensure more and more performers) is so important in keeping the meme alive. Flash mobs are the second kind of spatial meme, what I call Complex Action Memes. These memes allow for greater variance in performance style but require additional preparation on the part of the performers. Complex Action Memes still require a certain degree of recognizability which, for flash mobs, carries with

it complicated effects on spectation due to flash mob's reliance on a confrontation with the Fantastic for effect.

One sees this drive towards recognizability reflected on YouTube itself. A search performed in March of 2014 for the term "flash mob" reveals similarities in performed action across various unrelated events; this similarity of actions is enough to group post-Mob Project flash mob performance into a variety of genres. While not comprehensive, the following descriptions of various flash mob performances and their shared actions give one a sense of both the versatility of the performance methodology of flash mobs as well as the shift towards recognizability that helped drive the virality of, awareness of, and interest in the form itself.¹¹⁹

Genres of Flash Mob Performance, Post-Mob Project

Freezes: Freezes require performers to appear at a location and remain silent and immobile on cue, dispersing as per usual once another cue has been given (usually an agreed upon time or audio cue). The overloading of space and the incongruous action repurposing of said space occur simultaneously in these flash mobs.

Bang Mobs: These flash mobs replicate the activity of an action movie or "shooter" video game. Usually beginning with the Spaghetti Western trope of the "Mexican Standoff," participants then "shoot" each other by pointing their finger at another participant and shouting "bang!" This continues until a small number are left, at which point the "survivors" disperse, followed by the "dead."

¹¹⁹ The terminology describing these genres ranges from widely accepted (to the point of being featured in the title of the YouTube video) to self-coined.

Song Mobs: A relatively recent variation but one that has been gaining popularity, Song Mobs involve the participants singing, lip-syncing, or playing instruments, usually starting with one participant and steadily increasing in number. AlphabetPhotography's "Christmas Food Court Flash Mob, Hallelujah Chorus - Must See!" YouTube video, one of the first Song Mobs posted to YouTube, has been viewed over 35 million times.

Costume Mobs: A bit of a catch-all category, Costume Mobs make clothing the central activity of the performance. Perhaps the most famous and effective of these is the event documented in sfmallon's 2006 YouTube video "Where's Waldo Flash Mob." The incongruous action in this event comes from the conflating of "real" space with that of the popular Martin Handford book series "Where's Waldo?" as opposed to an activity that is bounded by the length of the flash mob event. Some flash mobs involve changing into costume as part of the activity of the mob itself (see the YouTube video "LIVE UNITED Flash Mob @ Union Station Washington DC" of 2008). I will return to both of these flash mobs next chapter.

Silent Rave: Also called the silent disco or mobile clubbing. In this type of flash mob, participants appear at a location en masse, each listening and dancing to music delivered by means of a personal music device such as a Walkman or MP3 player. These flash mobs can continue for five minutes or two hours, though the same criteria for all flash mobs apply; hence, silent raves that take place at actual dancehalls or discos are not flash mobs, or at least not particularly effective ones, as their action is only incongruous to the space owing to the use of headphones.

All of these genres are represented on YouTube with multiple videos but all were relatively short-lived. This is no doubt partly due to the fickle nature of virality- as recognizability reaches a point of diminishing returns, the meme either shifts forms and lives on

in a changed state or remains constant and dies out. However, in early 2009 a new genre was introduced as part of an advertising campaign, one of the first times a flash mob was used for such a purpose. Its impact on flash mobs as a performance style was immediate and extreme; from its debut until 2015 the majority of flash mob activity represented on YouTube falls into the genre it created. The flash mob was T-Mobile's "Dance," and therefore I refer to the flash mob genre it inspired as the "dance mob."

T-Mobile's "Dance" Flash Mob: Mediation's Effect on the Fantastic

The T-Mobile "Dance" commercial first aired during Celebrity Big Brother on January 16, 2009. The commercial went viral almost immediately, being forwarded nearly 2 million times on Facebook with an average of over 3 forwards per viewer.¹²⁰ The response on YouTube was even more vociferous; within six months the video had been viewed 16 million times, a number that as of February 2014 has ballooned to almost 40 million. The commercial response to the ad was also notable, as T-Mobile experienced its highest ever store footfall that January, with handset sales increasing by 22%.¹²¹ "Dance" went on to win a number of advertising awards in 2009, including the award for Best Television Commercial of the Year at the British Television Advertising Awards.¹²² Judging by virality and financial impact on its sponsoring company, then, T-Mobile's "Dance" flash mob was a great success. I will return to "Dance" as an advertisement next chapter; for now, I'd like to examine the performance methodology of

¹²⁰ <http://www.holycow.co.za/holycow-social-video/case-study---t-mobile/>

¹²¹ <http://www.holycow.co.za/holycow-social-video/case-study---t-mobile/>

¹²² http://saatchi.com/en-us/news/t-mobile_dance_named_uks_best_tv_commercial_of_2009

“Dance” using the YouTube video as a text in an attempt to determine exactly why it was successful as a flash mob.

“Dance” was performed in the Liverpool Street Station of London’s public transport system during rush hour on January 15th, 2009. According to Saatchi and Saatchi, the advertising agency responsible for the commercial, 350 dancers were employed to create the flash mob. It was uploaded to YouTube on January 16th, 2009, as a video entitled “The T-Mobile Dance;” it was uploaded to T-Mobile’s *lifesforsharing* channel, which shares a name with the larger advertising campaign which encapsulated the “Dance” performance. In addition, a supplementary video entitled “Making of T-Mobile Dance” was uploaded on January 24th, 2009 to the same channel. This video provided a behind-the-scenes look at the making of the advertisement and included additional information not normally available for a flash mob audience, such as the number of hidden cameras involved (ten), the amount of time it took to plan and rehearse (eight weeks), how long between the flash mob performance and its broadcast (twenty-four hours) and the number of dancers who auditioned for the performance (10,000).¹²³

It is a difficult thing to discuss the performance methodology and dramatic structure of a flash mob performance as viewed on YouTube without simultaneously discussing its videography. However, I will attempt to maintain a separation between the performance of the flash mob as seen in the YouTube video and the videography itself in the following analysis as much as possible, however artificial this separation may be. This will allow me to separate my analysis of the performance’s methodology and its potential effect on the live spectator from my analysis of the way that methodology is communicated as video and the effect this communication has on the at-home audience. First, I will examine the performance itself.

¹²³ lifesforsharing. "Making of T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

“Dance” begins in earnest at the 0:14 minute mark of “The T-Mobile Dance” YouTube video; a lone man moves into the center of the performance space (also the center of the frame of the opening shot) and begins to dance as the first notes of the song “Shout” are broadcast over what sounds like the space’s PA system. It is noticeable at that point in the video that there is a surprising amount of space surrounding the man from the very beginning of the performance. Compared to the previous seconds of footage that begin the video, one would think that traffic in the space had died off substantially, but a cursory glance at the edges of the frame indicates that there is a large amount of people still in the area; they are merely located just outside of what the at-home audience can now readily identify as the performance space.

The explanation for this change in the established patterns of the space is twofold. First, “Dance” utilizes as part of its performance methodology a series of nearly continuous entrances of performers. In other words, unlike the Mob Project performances and the majority of the flash mob genres listed above which use a simultaneous entrance for the entire chorus of performers, “Dance” starts with a single performer who is then joined by a small group of additional performers. This group is later joined by an additional group of performers, and so on and so on. This methodology has its own unique effects on reception which I will discuss later this chapter. For my present purposes, it is enough to understand that this methodology exists as a potential explanation for the alteration in behavior patterns immediately prior to the start of the performance; the performers of the flash mob who are as yet unrevealed to the live audience, in order to be able to quickly move into position when cued, have taken up locations along the outskirts of the performance space, effectively walling off the space from spectators. This tactic ensures a viable amount of space for the initial performer, maximizing visibility for both the live and the at-home audience.

The second explanation for this alteration of the space's normal patterns of behavior corresponds to Schechner's theory of "eruptions" and the basic three-stage theatrical pattern of 1) Gathering, 2) Performing, 3) Dispersing. While this pattern can be applied to more traditional theatrical performance- the audience gathers at a specified performance space, the actors perform, the audience and actors disperse and return to their established patterns of behavior- Schechner indicates that this pattern is equally applicable to non-traditional performances and naturally occurring events like accidents in urban settings:

An accident happens, or is caused to happen (as in guerrilla theatre); a crowd gathers to see what's happened. The crowd makes a circle around the event...The shape of this kind of street event- a heated center with involved spectators blending out to a cool rim where people come, peer in and move on...Only slowly does the event evaporate and the crowd disperse. I call such events 'eruptions.'¹²⁴

Comparing the beginning of "Dance" to Schechner's description of these eruptions reveals a similar spatial pattern. This pattern is noticeable in nearly all flash mobs but most especially in the dance mobs for which "Dance" served as the exemplar.

It is also observable that from the beginning of the event "Dance" exhibits a slightly different performance methodology than the Mob Project-era flash mobs in its use of a single initial performer. Unlike the majority of flash mobs, "Dance" begins with one participant performing the action of the mob- in this case, dancing. For the first eleven seconds of the performance he is alone, a single identifiable performer in the center of the performance space and frame. This one difference in performance methodology fundamentally alters the reception of the event, a fact that is made explicit when comparing the first eleven seconds of "Dance" to

¹²⁴ Schechner *Essays* 112

any eleven seconds of “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco.” As discussed above, “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco” consistently displays the three characteristics of flash mob performance. For the first eleven seconds, at least, “Dance” displays only two- incongruous action and anonymity (the space is far too large to be overloaded by a single performer).¹²⁵ However, even the nature of the anonymity between performer and spectator has been changed through the choice to begin the event with a single participant as that participant is now marked as *different* from everyone else surrounding him; he is still not identifiable as a performer *per se*, but he is also noticeably not part of the established patterns of the space. In the Mob Project-era events, it was the size of the chorus that partially enabled them to maintain anonymity; one person acting incongruously is easily dismissed as crazy, but a large group of people acting incongruously is disturbingly difficult to parse (as they are acting in opposition to the established patterns of the space but in accordance with others who are in the space), leading to an extended experience of the Fantastic. In “Dance,” the spectator’s experience of the Fantastic could be said to be delayed; the spectator sees the initial chorus member, marks him as different in their mind, and goes about their business. It isn’t until the entrance of the second performer/spectator at the 0:25 mark (the woman in the white coat, also center frame) that the spectator might begin to doubt their understanding of the event. This is followed by a single seven second shot in which the number of chorus members grows from two at 0:27 to around twelve at 0:35. This addition of chorus members accompanies a shift in music and dance style, the first of eight in the entire event- “Shout” by Lulu and the Luvvers, “The Only Way is Up” by Yaz, “Don’t Cha” by The Pussycat Dolls, “The Blue Danube Waltz” by Johann Strauss II, “Get Down On It” by Kool & The Gang,

¹²⁵ “Dance” actually accomplishes its incongruity through a variety of tactics: the action of dancing in a train station, the eventual overloading of space, and the use of some costumed performers throughout (note 1:13 for performers dressed as employees of the businesses in the station and 1:37 for a performer performing from WITHIN their place of employment, a coffee kiosk).

“Since You’ve Been Gone” by Rainbow, “My Boy Lollipop” by Millie Small, and “Do You Love Me” by The Contours.¹²⁶

After the 0:35 second mark, chorus members are continually added at a pace that makes exact numbers difficult to determine. The gradual and continuous addition of performers is represented in different ways, videographically speaking; there are shots of performers entering the previously established performance space or eruption from outside the perimeter of the performance where non-performing spectators have gathered to watch (1:27) and there are shots of performers joining the performance from a stationary position outside the perimeter of the performance space, thus expanding the performance space to include non-performing spectators (0:37). This constant influx of performers has three specific effects on the live and at-home spectator. First, it succeeds in achieving the initially unestablished overloading of space. By the final moment of the performance, the space is overloaded to such a degree that it is difficult to see the non-performing spectators. The established patterns of the space have been overwritten completely by the performance, and yet the performers are still able to return to anonymity in the denouement of the performance due to the rush hour pedestrian traffic and multiple exit opportunities the space provides.

The second effect is related to anonymity. As mentioned above, the lone performer who begins the flash mob is marked as different by the non-performing spectator. That initial assessment is altered by the gradual addition of performers. “The T-Mobile Dance” is careful to include many shots of performers joining the performance physically, moving from what the non-performing spectator believes to be safe, “audience” space into the previously established performance space itself. This undermines the spectator’s understanding of performer identity; if

¹²⁶ All of these songs were identified through the use of the music identification application Shazam, so there is some margin for error- for example, “Get Down On It” could well be the Blue version of the song.

that individual can be a performer, they may think, then *anyone* can be a performer. The spectators, both live and at-home, cannot tell who is a performer and who isn't a performer even two minutes into the performance. This continual restructuring of identity provides a new method of establishing the anonymity between performer and spectator- anonymity through doubt. This anonymity is much shorter lived than the anonymity of the Mob Project events, however, due to its repetition. Eventually, the audience recognizes and becomes familiar with the pattern, reducing anonymity.

In addition, "The T-Mobile Dance" also includes shots of what appear to be true non-performing spectators who have joined the performance without any prior knowledge, preparation, or even a full understanding of the event (see 1:30 and 1:55 for examples). These spectators are dancing and interacting with the performers but they are not performing the dance in unison with the performers; they are simply acting in a way that they feel is in line with the new patterns of the space. As discussed last chapter, in the Mob Project-era performances the division between performer and spectator was a source of Fantastic anxiety and potential conflict. In "Dance," performers were asked to continuously try and encourage spectators to join in the performance as they themselves joined the performance.¹²⁷ The Fantastic is still at work in "Dance" and dance mobs in general but it is clearly a different experience for the audience- welcoming and pleasant while still being mysterious and different, as opposed to the Mob Project-era experience of the Fantastic as confusing, frustrating and threatening. The reason for this change in reception is tied into the third effect the constant influx of performers has on the audience- it shifts the Fantastic from something that is experienced by the audience to something that is performed by introducing a clear Protagonist.

¹²⁷ lifesforsharing. "Making of T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

As postulated in Chapter 2, the commonalities of flash mob performance- anonymity between spectator and performer, overloading of space, and the performance of incongruous action- result in the experience of the Fantastic for the spectator. This experience is characterized by hesitation, confusion, anxiety and potentially a confrontation between the spectator and the performer- the natural result of a lengthy stay in the Fantastic. “Dance,” however, reduces the unnerving effects of the Fantastic through the gradual and continuous introduction of previously anonymous chorus members. Rather than a sudden and disconcerting immersion of the spectator in the Fantastical performance there is a gradual wading in, as it were; the spectator is given more time to parse the experience of the flash mob and determine their reaction to it. In “Dance,” the spectators are also given a focal point- the initial single performer who gives up a large portion of his anonymity the minute he begins to perform. One could refer to this initial performer as a Thespis of sorts, stepping out of the anonymous chorus in order to take on a more defined role. The audience notices the behavior of the single initial performer as incongruous to the space and draws conclusions accordingly- he is strange, he is crazy, he is behaving in accordance with a mode of behavior at odds with the established patterns of the space. If the initial chorus member performed the entirety of “Dance” alone, then the audience might experience annoyance and confusion at the lone disruptor- feelings similar to the Fantastic but without most of the hesitation in interpreting the event.¹²⁸ When the second performer, the woman in white, joins in the action of the performance, however, it potentially alters the audience’s reception of the flash mob. It is my theory that this moment of joining, a moment which is repeated throughout the flash mob with different performers, can be interpreted as a performance of the spectator’s own experience of the Fantastic.

¹²⁸ There is, in fact, another cellular phone service advertisement which makes use of the image of the lone flash mob performer- BBDO’s own “Dance” advertisement for AT & T, which I will return to next chapter.

The use of a single initial performer in “Dance” (literally a Protagonist in the sense of *protagonistes*, or first actor) matches well with the literary experience of the Fantastic explained last chapter. In the literary experience of the Fantastic, a single character (usually the Protagonist) with whom the audience is aligned performs the confrontation with the Fantastic on the reader’s behalf. This confrontation results in the anxiety and confusion that characterizes the Fantastic; in literature, however, this confusion and anxiety is made more pleasurable than threatening by the idea of distance. As discussed earlier, distance is what enables the aesthetic appreciation of art; low distance results in a closer emotional alignment of spectator with event, higher distance results in greater rationality in the appreciation of the event. In the literary version of the Fantastic the reader is closely aligned with the character confronting the Fantastic through the similarity of the narrative context to the real world of the reader. The fact that the character confronting the Fantastic is contained within the narrative and the reader is not provides a small degree of distance, allowing the Fantastic to produce pleasure for the reader in addition to anxiety and confusion.

This, I theorize, is the difference between the experience of spectating a Mob Project event and spectating “Dance” and other dance mobs; the Mob Project events lacked a clear Protagonist. The anonymous performers in the Mob Project events appeared simultaneously, overloading the space with incongruous action. The result of this simultaneous performance is an unframed event with little to no distance between spectator and performer. Thus, the audience for the Mob Project events no doubt experienced the confusion, hesitation, and anxiety of the Fantastic without much of the pleasure the literary experience of the Fantastic can bring. The use of a single initial performer, the Protagonist of “Dance,” potentially restores some of the distance of the literary Fantastic as well as the pleasure.

Not only that, but the use of a single initial performer who is continuously joined by additional performers provides an embodiment of the spectator's experience of the Fantastic- a performance of the reception of the performance, if you will. One of the key components of the experience of the Fantastic is that it is colored by expectation and limited by time. Only the un-, dis-, or anti-expected provokes a confrontation with the Fantastic, according to Rabkin, and according to Todorov that confrontation has a specific range of resolutions that are inevitably reached after a variable-length period of hesitation- either the event follows unknown but defined rules or it redefines those rules. "Dance" features multiple moments in which individuals that appear to be spectators actually join in the performance. These individuals have been performers all along, of course- they have merely been performing the role of spectator as they wait for their choreographed entrance. The use of these delayed entrances combined with the performers' attempt to authentically perform both of their roles (spectator and performer, which I will henceforward refer to as "performer/spectator") mirrors the experience of the unaware flash mob spectator. The performer/spectator initially appears to experience the surprise and confusion of a confrontation with the Fantastic- the incongruity of the flash mob's action conflicting with the expectations of behavior that the performance space carries with it. The performer/spectator's moment of joining (in which they reveal their true nature as performers) can be read as a performance of the resolution of the experience of the Fantastic; the performer/spectator has come to a conclusion regarding the nature of the event they were witnessing, ending their hesitation and proceeding to act on that conclusion.

These moments of joining are spread throughout "Dance," and every time an individual performer or group of performers moves from the liminal state of performer/spectator to the resolved state of performer the audience has another opportunity to re-evaluate their own

experience of the performance. These opportunities serve to increase the distance between audience and performance that began with the use of a clear Protagonist. In addition, because these continual additions to the chorus of performers decreases the anonymity between performer and spectator the performance becomes increasingly framed as just that- a performance. The resulting effect on reception is that the audience of “Dance” experiences the hesitation of the Fantastic in a more abbreviated form. The increased distance and eventual loss of anonymity due to the use of a clear Protagonist and multiple entrances of performer/spectators enable the audience for “Dance” and dance mobs in general to experience both the confusion of the Fantastic and the pleasure of its inevitable resolution.

This shift in reception is captured and communicated videographically as well. The 0:40, 1:28, and 1:42 marks represent the moments in “The T-Mobile Dance” video when performers of the flash mob shift from acting as spectators to acting openly as performers. These moments of joining are accompanied by spectators appearing to react with surprise and pleasure to the realization that the individuals next to them are in reality part of the event they are witnessing. Of course, a necessary component to this moment of joining being performed successfully is the authenticity with which the performer/spectators perform their roles. In order to consider this, one must briefly consider the nature of acting in flash mobs.¹²⁹

Acting in Flash Mob Performance

In order to establish that acting in the theatrical sense exists on some level in flash mob performances, a look at the work of two performance theorists previously mentioned, William

¹²⁹ In this case I use the term acting to mean something related to the traditional theatrical idea of the performance of a character at least somewhat removed from oneself.

Gillette and Michael Kirby, is needed. Gillette was a late 19th/early 20th century actor and playwright most famous for his 1,300-performance-long career portraying Sherlock Holmes on stage and screen. However, his greater contribution to the craft of acting was his 1915 paper “The Illusion of the First Time in Acting.” In this paper he remarks that the audiences of his time had grown so aware of the nuances of performance and so refined in their taste for subtlety that the craft of acting had to adapt to continue to serve them. Part of that adaptation was the realization that physical and emotional precision was not enough to achieve the goal of the theatre- “the inter-play of simulated human passion and human character,” in Gillette’s words.¹³⁰ What was additionally needed to achieve that goal were the inconsistencies, quirks, and flaws that make up personality and which were often erased in the course of a lengthy rehearsal process or run. These errors and imperfections, when preserved or intentionally sought after and performed, worked to create for the audience the illusion that the stage action had never been performed before that exact moment- Gillette’s Illusion of the First Time. This illusion presumably ensured that a character even as well-known and long-running as Gillette’s Holmes seemed authentic and spontaneous at every performance rather than rehearsed and lifeless.

In the Mob Project-era events, there are only the slightest suggestions of acting by performers. For example, in the first successful Mob Project event (the “Love Rug” flash mob), the performers all appeared in a department store at the same time and asked for the same item- a rug for their imaginary commune. As defined by Schechner, the action of this mob, asking for something one doesn’t actually want, certainly constitutes restored behavior and therefore performance. But does it represent acting? To answer that question one needs to consult the work of Michael Kirby. Michael Kirby’s article “On Acting and Not-Acting” appeared in *The Drama*

¹³⁰ Gillette 28

Review in March of 1972. Kirby's stated goal was to develop a continuum on which all performance could be placed in regards to the amount of acting it contained, which Kirby defined thusly: "If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate and so forth, he is acting."¹³¹ On the far left of the continuum are performances in which the performer does not feign or simulate actively but may still have simulation applied to or read in the performer by the spectator. These individuals would be participating in Non-Matrixed Performing or Non-Matrixed Representation respectively. The middle ground of the continuum is "Received" Acting. He uses as an example of "Received" Acting an extra in a film or a theatrical performance. These extras may merely be standing, or performing an everyday action just as they would normally, but by the nature of their performance taking place within a larger performance context and by the fact that this everyday performance is witnessed by spectators, they are assumed to be acting. They have no lines, they may not be actively performing at all, and they may not have assumed any identity but their own, but they are received by the spectator as acting because of their context and the expectations that come with it- the established patterns of a theatre or a movie-house, to use my own terminology. At the right of the continuum are the performers in which at least one characteristic, either physical or emotional, is simulated consciously by the performer; Simple and Complex Acting are separated in part by the number of simulated characteristics and behaviors.

KIRBY's NOT-ACTING/ACTING CONTINUUM¹³²

NOT-ACTING			ACTING	
Non-Matrixed	Non-Matrixed	"Received"	Simple	Complex
Performing	Representation	Acting	Acting	Acting

¹³¹ Kirby, Michael. "On Acting and Not-Acting" *The Drama Review: TDR* , Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 1972) , 6

¹³² Kirby 8

As a whole the Mob Project-era performances fall anywhere from non-matrixed performing to simple acting, to use Michael Kirby's Not Acting/Acting Continuum. The distinction, as I perceive it, between these gradations in Mob Project flash mobs seems to be in the nature of the incongruous action of the performance. In Mob #3 (the "Hotel Lobby" flash mob), the performer/spectators fall far to the left of Kirby's spectrum, perhaps even so far left as Non-Matrixed Performing; they perform, in Wasik's own words, no action for the true spectators of the event, one of the key considerations in evaluating matrixed performance. However, this was true in Wasik's view of all the Mob Project events and I perceive a difference between the action of Mob #3 (silence followed by applause) and the action of Mob #2 (shopping for a rug one does not want for a commune that does not exist). In the first paragraph of Kirby's article "On Acting and Not-Acting," he specifically references Happenings in order to prove that "not all performing is acting;" given the similarities in performance methodology between Happenings and flash mobs, the same thinking would seem to apply to most flash mobs as well.¹³³ However, it is my contention that "Dance" and the genre of flash mob performance it inspired represents a much farther step to the right of Kirby's continuum than the Mob Project events- not quite reaching the complex acting Gillette was writing about but closer to it. The reason for this shift is the above-mentioned performed moment of joining in which one performer/spectator is "convinced" to join the flash mob event, shifting their identity from performer/spectator to performer in a choreographed reveal that nonetheless attempts to disguise its nature as performance so that it seems authentic and new for the spectator- the illusion of the first time at work.

¹³³ Kirby 3

By examining the “Making of T-Mobile Dance” YouTube video, it is apparent that there was an intentional attempt to create this illusion of the first time. In auditioning dancers for the flash mob, we hear a number of criteria and instructions mentioned by the director Michael Gracey and choreographer Ashley Wallen: “Lots of smiles- like you’re in your bedroom, jumping around,” “You gotta look like people who just love to dance,” “it’s great to hit the steps but it’s more about your energy,” etc.¹³⁴ It seems that Wallen and Gracey were interested in dancers who could communicate the illusion of spontaneity that Gillette wrote about nearly a century before “Dance” was performed. In addition, midway through the audition footage in “Making of T-Mobile Dance” we hear Gracey tell Wallen “We’re getting a lot of that same dancer stereotype” over footage of very thin, young, and graceful professional dancers. The video then shifts to footage of older, less formally trained dancers performing; “This is looking better,” Wallen replies. The implication is that both director and choreographer were concerned with creating a chorus of performer/spectators which was not only diverse but was also composed of individuals who looked as if they were authentic to the performance space itself- a group of people who would not draw attention to themselves before they joined the flash mob in earnest. In other words, Wallen and Gracey were looking for convincing performers who could demonstrate authentic and believable identities both as performer/spectators and performers.

Impact of “Dance” and the Birth of the Dance Mob

The impact of “Dance” on flash mob performance and popularity cannot be overstated. A YouTube search for flash mobs performed on March 15th, 2014 sorted by relevance show that

¹³⁴ lifesforsharing. "Making of T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

thirteen of the top twenty non-ad results are dance mobs performed in the style of “The T-Mobile Dance,” a 65% percentage that remains consistent as one moves through the roughly ten million results. Of course, each of these flash mobs demonstrate originality and alterations in performance methodology to a greater or lesser degree but all clearly demonstrate their allegiance to the new staging decisions made in the performance of “Dance.” The performance methodology of these dance mobs has become so dominant in flash mob performance that the two concepts have become virtually synonymous. For example, in the comments section of “Supermarket Flashmob,” a YouTube video of a freeze mob posted June 13th, 2007, user CmlK100 asks “i thought a flash mob was when people randomly started dancing?”, a sentiment echoed in the comments section of many non-dance mob videos.¹³⁵ To serve as a study of the influence of these shifts in flash mob performance methodology and reception, I will briefly analyze a dance mob video performed and uploaded to YouTube within three months of the premier of “Dance”- “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video- 21st March 2009.”

The Lincoln flash mob took place on the High Street of Lincoln, England, on March 21, 2009. As seen in tmallion’s YouTube video “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009” as well as the related YouTube video “Lincoln Flashmob Documentary Teaser,” this event is a dance mob organized as part of Trademark Production’s documentary “Flashmobs- The Story Behind the Madness.” The “Official” video was uploaded on March 23rd of 2009 with the “Documentary” video being uploaded on November 9th of the same year. “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009” has garnered 342,306 views as of March 15th, 2014, a relatively small amount compared to “Dance” and other extraordinarily viral flash mob videos. It is partially for this reason (along with its closeness in setting and performance and upload date)

¹³⁵ Tomcruz84. “Supermarket Flashmob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 June 2007.

that I have chosen it as my example- it demonstrates that even relatively small-scale flash mobs were inspired to imitate the high-profile, professionally produced and polished “Dance.”

As with my discussion of “The T-Mobile Dance,” I will attempt to separate my analysis of the performative from my analysis of the videographic, which I return to later in the chapter. In “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009” as in “The T-Mobile Dance,” one can see that just before the performance begins (from 0:16 to 0:20) the initial performer or Protagonist seems to be milling around a fairly open space in the middle of the thoroughfare; like “Dance,” this openness is not indicative of the established patterns of the space but the creation of a performance space by future performer/spectators and is reinforced by the natural response of spectators to an eruption-style performance event. However, there is a slight difference in the “Lincoln” event’s attempt to create and manage this space. At 0:22, just after the Protagonist begins dancing, one can see a woman in a green sweater begin dancing as well. There are different moves being performed by the Protagonist and the woman but her immediate reaction to the music seems to indicate prior knowledge of the event. At 1:05, she can be seen just at the edge of the performance space, mirroring the choreography of the large performer/spectator group. It is impossible to tell from this video the degree of her involvement since she never steps into the performance space, completing her transition from performer/spectator to performer; it is possible, however unlikely, that she was completely unaware of the event and picked up the relatively simple choreography through her role as a spectator, much like one sees at various points in the “Dance” video. It is far more probable, however, that she was involved in the performance intentionally on some level, perhaps remaining on the outskirts to continue to help define the space. It is probable that she is a friend or relation of one of the other performer/spectators or that she is one of the behind-the-scenes participants like the production

staff of “Dance.” That is one of the most notable differences between the “Dance” and “Lincoln” videos, and it is a difference that is noticeable on multiple levels: the apparatus that makes a flash mob possible is almost completely invisible in “Dance” and is far more visible in “Lincoln.” I will return to this notion of the visibility of the apparatus later this chapter.

The performance itself begins in earnest at the 0:20 mark with the first note of James Brown’s “I Feel Good.” The Protagonist begins dancing by himself, just as in “Dance,” though unlike “Dance” it is unclear to what degree the dancing is choreographed- in other words, the performance of “Dance” feels more professional and the performance of “Lincoln” feels more amateurish. Much like in “Dance,” one can see that an individual performing an incongruous action in a space draws attention to himself while also repelling unaware spectators; passers-by give the Protagonist a wide berth, going out of their way to avoid him while at the same time paying attention to his incongruous activity. This helps further define the performance space and by driving out non-participants the Protagonist helps to make room for future participants. A great example of this is the Protagonist’s actions at 0:30, confronting spectators in a playful yet direct manner in keeping with the event’s chosen incongruous action. Once the space has been defined and filled by performer/spectators, the non-performing spectators behave conversely- they crowd in, creating a cordon around the performers. This can be seen at 0:38 in the lower portion of the screen; as performers move towards the top of the screen to join the flash mob so too do spectators, stopping a safe distance away from what they now correctly perceive to be the performance space.

At the 0:32 mark there seem to be other participants joining the Protagonist, and by 0:36 there is obvious synchronous choreography being performed by an increasingly large group of people. Moving deeper into the video, starting at the 0:48 mark and continuing until 1:21 (as well

as reoccurring at multiple points later) one notices that all the performer/spectators are facing a single direction. This configuration calls to mind a musical theatre production number taking place in a proscenium stage arrangement: the audience is arranged facing a single direction (forward, towards the performers) and the performers, minus some slight variations for the sake of staging, are facing a single direction as well (forward, towards the audience). In the “Lincoln” flash mob, the audience is indeed facing a single direction (forward, towards the performers) but the performers are in the middle of the audience in the style of an arena or in-the-round stage arrangement. The performers, for their part, are also facing a single direction- forward, as in a proscenium arrangement. The result in an event which does not seem aware of sight-lines or traditional staging concerns, and in which roughly three-fourths of the audience will be viewing the performers’ backs for the majority of the event.

This contradiction in staging may be the result of the ways in which most flash mobs are rehearsed. As discussed, most flash mobs never require the performers to meet before the event itself; instead, they rely on alternate methods such as YouTube videos to communicate the steps and timing. For example, view the YouTube video “Flash mob choreography teaching video - turn volume WAY up!.” This “how-to” guide prepares the future performer/spectators for their role in the event and has the advantage of being able to be viewed in private, maintaining the secrecy and surprise so necessary to the creation and maintenance of anonymity in flash mobs. Videos such as these allow for a synchronous event without large group rehearsals. What they cannot provide, however, is a solution to complex staging issues such as fine-tuning synchronicity and managing sight-lines. Hence flash mobs that rely on synchronous action (such as dance mobs like “Lincoln”) often have a loose, unpolished quality that works in their favor; to the audience this could read as unrehearsed and spontaneous, making the action seem more

authentic. This contradiction between audience and performer arrangement is also seen at multiple moments throughout the “Dance” video- for example, 0:44, 1:23, and 1:47. However, there appears to be far more awareness of sightlines, camera placement, and audience engagement there, in part due to the higher production values and live rehearsals of “Dance.”

Like “Dance,” “Lincoln” uses a mix of popular music as its soundtrack. This marks the “Lincoln” flash mob as being performed especially soon after the premier of “Dance” as this production decision was one of the few that did not experience a lengthy lifespan; dance mobs always incorporate music but more often than not the event relies on a single song, usually well-known or popular at the particular historical moment of its performance (see the YouTube video “Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash-Dance Piccadilly Circus, London for Trident Unwrapped,” uploaded to YouTube April 21, 2009, within six months of the release of Beyonce’s single “Single Ladies”). The “Lincoln” flash mob uses a mix of six songs: James Brown’s “I Feel Good,” the Village People’s “YMCA,” Rednex’s “Cotton-Eyed Joe,” Vampire Weekend’s “A-Punk,” Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” and RunDMC’s “It’s Like That.”¹³⁶ These songs are from different musical genres but they all are either classics of their respective genres or were popular at the time of the event’s performance. Also, many of them suggest easily replicable dance moves (the YMCA dance, “Cotton-Eyed Joe”’s do-si-do) or feature sections that allow for participation, assuming prior knowledge of the song or genre (“A-Punk”’s “hey”s, “We Will Rock You”’s hand claps). This is very similar to the thinking behind the selection of songs in “Dance”; according to the “Making of T-Mobile Dance” video, the songs used in the performance were chosen because they all represented “music that tells you how to dance.”¹³⁷ In addition, in multiple moments throughout “Dance” one can hear what sounds like the audience

¹³⁶ Once again, there is some possibility for error in the identification of these songs.

¹³⁷ lifesforsharing. “Making of T-Mobile Dance.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

singing along with the music of the performance- see the 1:33 and 1:54 marks. So for both events there was consideration of the affect music selection could have on audience engagement and recognition.

Looking at the way in which “Lincoln” displays the three characteristics of flash mob performance- the overloading of space, the performance of incongruous action, and the anonymity between performer and spectator- one can see that the overloading of the space works to a large extent because of the creation and preservation of open space discussed above.

Looking at the first fifteen seconds of the video one can see that the performance site is extremely busy; the supplementary video “Lincoln Flashmob Documentary Teaser” confirms that observation around the 0:26 mark. By establishing a loose perimeter around the performance site, the participants aid in the effectiveness of the overloading. By the 0:38 mark, the contrast between the opening moments of the event itself and its newly overloaded state is clear. Close up shots such as 0:52 as well as long shots such as 0:55 (both of which show synchronous activity) provide convincing proof that, from multiple viewpoints, the event appears to take up the entire thoroughfare. The incongruous action is especially clear in most “Dance”-inspired mobs (dancing as an activity has very specific spatial limits) and the “Lincoln” flash mob is no exception. The multiple dance styles combined with the use of both synchronous (such as 1:05) and asynchronous choreography (“freestyle” sections such as 2:14) ensure that the action of the event is marked as different not only from its immediate context but also from standard dancehall behavior. The anonymity between performer and spectator functions along very similar lines to “Dance” in the use of a clear Protagonist (who gets even more of a focus in “Lincoln” from both a performance as well as videographic standpoint) and the gradual incorporation of additional chorus members as in “Dance” (0:35, for example).

Flash Mobs for the At-Home Spectator

Up to this point I have used the word “spectator” to refer specifically to the live audience of a flash mob performance. The experience for the mediated audience- the YouTube, or at-home, spectator- must be considered. I will demonstrate how YouTube video of “Dance” and the dance mobs it inspired like “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009” create the same sense of anonymity, overloading, and incongruous action (as well as communicating the alterations to performance methodology introduced by the dance mob like the use of a clear Protagonist) for the mediated spectator through the use of videography and editing.

The opening shot of the YouTube video “The T-Mobile Dance” is a three second long title card shot with the words “Liverpool Street Station 11:00am 15th January 2009.” In addition to providing a more concrete setting for the at-home audience, the very first thing “The T-Mobile Dance” communicates is that it has been edited. This in itself marks the video as different from many of flash mob videos uploaded to YouTube in the first few years of its existence. As discussed earlier this chapter, videos like “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco” were typical as far as flash mob performance capture was concerned- single camera, low quality, unedited, and short. “The T-Mobile Dance” was not the first to use editing or even multiple cameras to capture the performance but its massive viral popularity along with increased accessibility and usability of editing programs transformed those videographic qualities from niceties to necessities. By comparison, the very first shot of the YouTube video “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009” is a long shot of the thoroughfare from an elevated location. By watching the supplementary video “Lincoln Flashmob Documentary Teaser” one can deduce this is most probably the camera located on the roof across from the performance site as seen at the 0:24

mark. After the title card, the “Dance” video begins with a very similar long shot from a very similar location. I will return to the ways in which camera position communicates different ideas to the at-home audience of flash mobs, but for both of these videos the initial long shots serve as what one would call establishing shots.

Going back to the “Lincoln” video, in the lower left of the screen one sees the title “The Lincoln Flashmob” for eight seconds, which is then replaced in the lower right of the screen by the title “Saturday 21st March 1pm.” The titles used in both of these videos to establish setting are not difficult to add to a video- even the most rudimentary video editing software contains the ability to insert titles and text over images- but they do immediately communicate that the video and therefore the event itself has been altered from its “original” state in order to achieve an effect. Alongside the titles in the first fifteen seconds of the “Lincoln” video one sees an effect commonly known as “fast motion,” more properly termed undercranking. Historically, this effect was achieved by filming events at a slower than normal rate (hence the term undercranking) and then projecting it at normal speed. In the digital realm, this effect is now achieved by clicking a button in Final Cut or a similar editing suite. In either case, the effect on an audience is one of frantic action or elapsed time. In the “Lincoln” video it serves an additional purpose- to establish the normal patterns of the performance site.

During the viewing of the video, the audience assumes that the undercranked footage is taking place in the minutes before the start of the flash mob event. When the event begins in earnest, then, the viewer places the patterns established in the undercranked opening fifteen seconds in opposition to the action of the flash mob, making the incongruity obvious even to an audience removed spatially and temporally from the original live event. However, this brings up an important issue with edited flash mob videos and the at-home audience; the assumption that

the opening footage and the footage of the flash mob event take place contiguously is a dangerous one. It is partially due to the inserted time and date title that the assumption seems reasonable yet the very fact that there are titles and fast-motion effects reveals that the video is edited. Therefore the opening fifteen seconds could represent any amount of time recorded at any other time in the same location at roughly the same time of day. The footage could be from days before or after the event or it could be directly contiguous; without positive contextual confirmation, which the video does not provide except in the inserted title, the viewer has no way of knowing. This is especially true in “Dance;” in the “Making of T-Mobile Dance” video, there is a sequence later in the video of director Michael Gacey and the production crew viewing the event from a control booth with displeasure, and at 3:39 Gacey can be heard saying “Let’s go again, as fast as we can.”¹³⁸ This indicates that there might have been multiple “original” performances of “Dance” that were edited together to create a cohesive whole for the at-home audience. If this were the case and more attention was brought to it, this fact might negatively impact the at-home spectator’s reception of the event by distancing “Dance” from the original practices of the Mob Project events and therefore the “authenticity” of flash mob performance. I will return to the notion of authenticity next chapter. For now, it is enough to note that unless the viewer is especially cognizant of the constructed nature of video the effect of editing two or more takes together remains the same- it communicates the established patterns of the space in order to make the incongruous action of the flash mob even more effective for the at-home audience.

Closely connected to the idea of editing is the fact that both the “Dance” and “Lincoln” videos capture the entire performance event through the use of not only multiple cameras but multiple camera locations and recording angles. This provides the at-home spectator with a more

¹³⁸ lifesforsharing. "Making of T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

complete view of the performance site and the performance itself. It also more clearly communicates the degree of overloading that takes place, though that is not always an advantage to the relative success or failure of the flash mob. In early, single-camera flash mob videos, the performance space can seem overloaded even without a large number of participants due to the single and relatively stationary camera placement. The use of multiple cameras and camera placements in “Dance” and “Lincoln” provides the opportunity to give a more accurate understanding of the three commonalities to the at-home spectator but increases the necessity of those commonalities being performed successfully in the live event.

In the “Making of T-Mobile Dance” video camera placement is given special attention; multiple shots throughout the video (see the 3:12 and 3:15 marks) demonstrate the care and thought that went into camera placement, even going so far as to include a shot of a diagram of the space that appears to mark where the cameras will be placed and who will operate them. Cameras are even given their own section in the “preview”-style footage that opens the video; one of the title cards in that section boasts “10 HIDDEN CAMERAS,” followed by three shots of cameras being hidden in bags, disguised as still cameras, and placed in hollowed out vending machines while a voiceover (perhaps from director Michael Gacey) states “As soon as the general public spot a camera, game’s over.”¹³⁹ This indicates that there was a real concern for not only the anonymity necessary for successful flash mob performances but also the authenticity of the event itself.

In “Dance,” the multiple camera locations serve different purposes for the at-home audience. As mentioned above, the long establishing shot that begins the video of the performance itself is useful for communicating patterns of the performance space to audience

¹³⁹ lifesforsharing. “Making of T-Mobile Dance.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

members potentially far removed in their knowledge of and access to said space. This initial long shot displays some camera-shake, meaning it is not completely stationary. This is no doubt unintentional but it provides a potential benefit to the reception of “Dance” by bringing its otherwise professional camerawork in line with earlier, amateurish recordings such as “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco.” In addition, the camera’s placement suggests a neutrality and a connection to space itself; even though it is perfectly situated to catch the Protagonist center frame, its distance from the event and its height suggest to the at-home audience a security camera, giving an implicit reason why this “unexpected” event should be so perfectly captured and helping to reinforce the commonality of anonymity.

In most early flash mob YouTube videos the performance is already underway at the beginning of the video; similarly, the video may end before the event actually dispersed. These videos are almost always single camera/single point of view affairs, most of which have a shakiness and general amateurish quality about them. This quality combined with the fact that the video does not encompass the entire flash mob event communicates to the audience that the video was unplanned. The at-home viewer assumes that the cameraperson encountered the flash mob at random and that speaks to the “improvised,” ephemeral, authentic quality of the event itself (not to mention the anonymity and incongruity found in all flash mob performance). Edited flash mob videos lack this “found footage” quality and unlike many of the earlier flash mob YouTube videos, both “Dance” and “Lincoln” performances are captured in their entirety; the videos begin early enough to document the established patterns of the space and end late enough to document the dispersal of the performers and the return of these patterns. This in and of itself communicates to the more technologically aware among the at-home audience a certain degree of preparation and professionalism. The cell phone cameras which were used to record many

flash mobs such as “Pillow Fight Club- San Francisco” did not have enough memory to capture more than half a minute of performance, much less an entire flash mob at the level of video quality displayed by “Dance” and “Lincoln” in 2009. Therefore, in order to retain that sense of authenticity so important to a successful flash mob video, the “improvised” quality of the event must be created through editing and shot selection. Having access to the whole event through a variety of well-chosen camera placements allows a clever editor to focus on clearly communicating these three commonalities, increasing the chance the at-home viewer will align the event with previous flash mobs and experience a similar reception to the live spectator.

To expand on these editorial choices and their effect on the spectator requires a brief consideration of the work of Caetlin Benson-Allot. In her 2013 book *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship From VHS to File Sharing*, Benson-Allot theorizes how cinematography and editing in found-footage-style horror movies communicate authenticity to their audiences. She connects the reception of these movies with the reception of late 1980s reality television programs like *Cops* and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* in which “poor framing, unsteady camerawork, and jarring or incongruous pans and zooms” are videographic signals of their truthfulness.¹⁴⁰ Found footage horror movies are, of course, not made of found footage at all- they are merely shot and edited to look like found footage, a quality Benson-Allot calls “faux footage.” This footage is often utilized in conjunction with higher quality footage. In *The Blair Witch Project*, the footage from documentary film the characters are making, with its smoother, more accomplished camerawork, is placed in opposition to the flawed “behind-the-scenes” footage captured by the characters in more personal moments. As a result, the flawed footage communicates...

¹⁴⁰ Benson-Allot, Caetlin. *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship From VHS to File Sharing*. (Oakland; University of California Press, 2013) 179

...that the moments they capture are real, their actions spontaneous, and the outcome unpredictable...[main character] Heather's wobbly framing and flamboyant zooms establish her behind-the-scenes footage as a home movies and hence private, unrehearsed, and potentially interesting.¹⁴¹

"Dance," like these faux footage horror films, is intentionally constructed to look like amateur videography in certain moments. This footage usually originates from a camera position close to the action of the flash mob and is often eye-level; combined with the shaky, flawed camerawork, this communicates the "reality" of the event to the at-home spectator.

Benson-Allott's work is a re-visitation and re-thinking of Apparatus theory. Detailed most famously by Jean-Louis Baudry, Apparatus theory is a complex and contested body of work that includes such notable theorists as Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Laura Mulvey, and Christian Metz. It draws on Freud, Marx, and semiotics to theorize film spectatorship as ideological and the spectatorial position as primarily passive. There are serious objections to be made to Apparatus theory and the passive, uninformed spectator it theorizes, but one of its simpler observations can be usefully applied to the study of flash mob reception- the fact that the technological apparatus necessary for the capture and display of film remains unseen and unconsidered by the spectator causes the spectator to identify with the camera itself.¹⁴² This results in an obfuscation of the technical work of cinema (the cinematography, editing, etc) that Apparatus theorists suggest constructs meaning for the spectator by eliminating the distinction between the film and the profilmic- the filmed reality and the projected reality becomes the only reality for the spectator. This effect works in part because of the architecture of the cinema itself,

¹⁴¹ Benson-Allot 180

¹⁴² For a more complete understanding of these objections, see James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*.

aligning the spectator's viewpoint with the projector in a darkened, perspectival space.¹⁴³ For the at-home audience of a flash mob this architecture is a non-issue. However, as discussed above there is a similar identification that occurs between the at-home audience and certain camera positions in flash mob videography, most notably the eye-level spectator POV camera locations. This identification effectively serves to align the experience of the at-home spectator with that of the live spectator. In addition, I would argue that this identification is most effectively produced when the apparatus of recording is hidden not only because of Baudry's theory but also because of Todorov's; the lack of a visible apparatus communicates that the context of the performance is a "real world" context, a necessity for the creation of the Fantastic effect.

Returning to the camera placements in "Dance," the next one seen is on border of the performance space itself, an eye-level point of view with noticeable camera-shake. This is a mobile camera that shifts positions as the first additional performers join the performance. This camera serves as a stand-in for the at-home audience; the height of the camera and distance from the action of the performance are consistent with the experience of a live spectator, communicating the sense of impromptu recording that might be otherwise lost in a video as polished as "Dance." The video shifts back and forth between these two cameras until the 0:43 mark, the first placement (having moving along the upper railing) being utilized to display choreography and the second placement being used to highlight the addition of performer/spectators and shifts in music. At 0:43 a potential third placement is used- above the action but closer than the first placement and positioned to make best advantage of the proscenium-style (all performer/spectators facing a single direction) choreography. At the 0:52

¹⁴³ Baudry, Jean-Louis. "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema." Rosen, Philip, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

mark we see a mid-shot of what may or may not be a non-performing spectator; this is the first of many such shots, focusing on a single spectator actively engaging with the performance in some way, blurring the line between chorus member and audience. While there are occasional variations, the rest of the video is primarily constructed using these four types of placements- the high angle shot of the event in its entirety, the eye-level spectator point-of-view shot, the proscenium choreography shot, and the spectator reaction mid-to-medium close-up. Every camera used in documenting “Dance” has a certain amount of movement to it, whether it is the shaky-cam effect of the spectator POV or a subtle zoom employed by the high angle event camera.

Going sequentially through the “Lincoln” video there seem to be as many as six different points of view that are easily identified.

- 1- The camera responsible for the opening undercranked footage. Multiple long shots from this angle appear in the video (0:35, 1:18, etc), and I am assuming this to be the camera placement on the roof of the building across the street from the performance site.
- 2- On the street, first shot at 0:15. It is possible that this is the only spectator point of view. However, given the fast cut at 0:23 to a nearly opposite angle, it seems highly probable that there is another street level camera represented by the next position.
- 3- On the street, first shot at 0:23. If this were an event that was going to be repeatedly staged and shot a single camera could have captured both angles on different takes. Given the single performance nature of most flash mobs (“Dance” being a notable exception), it is far more likely that two street level cameras were taping simultaneously, producing the second and third points of view.

- 4- On the street, located primarily behind the action, first shot at 0:47. This point of view is potentially one of the street level cameras, quickly repositioned behind. However, I view this as a separate camera due to two factors. First, the sheer number of people located along the sides of the performance space (the performer/spectators responsible for the creation and preservation of the performance space as well as the spectators who gather around the rim of the eruption) would make travelling quickly from the front of the event to the rear in roughly twenty-four seconds quite difficult. Second, there seems to be a noticeable difference in quality between the points of view mentioned above and this one. I believe this fourth point of view is most probably cell phone footage captured by one of the participants who created and maintained the performance space; that would explain the relative graininess and very slight “fishbowl” effect seen at 0:47.
- 5- Above, in window, first shot at 1:02. This point of view seems to be located indoors, one flight directly above the action of the event. In this shot and in later shots the glass of the window is clearly seen as graininess at the bottom of the frame.
- 6- Above, no window, first shot at 0:43. I am hesitant to refer to this as a separate point of view. It could very well be the initial camera location, quickly moved to another point on the roof. However, it is just as likely that there is a sixth camera.

At 2:49, there is an elevated point of view that records the dispersal of the event. I believe this is a street level camera that has climbed up a floor, but it is possible that it is a seventh distinct point of view. For that matter, because the video is edited it is actually impossible for the at-home viewer to know precisely how many cameras have been used to capture the event;

though unlikely, it is a possibility that every point of view cut to or from represents its own camera location.

While “The T-Mobile Dance” and “The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video – 21st March 2009” both utilize similar camera placements in order to generate similar effects, there is one important distinction between them- the visibility of the cameras themselves. The production crew of “Dance” went to great lengths to hide the cameras from the non-performing spectators. In “Lincoln,” however, there are multiple shots of non-performing participants documenting the event. The first shot appears at the 0:30 mark; on the left side of the screen- a man holding a camera below his waist moves around the action of the event. At the 0:54 mark in the foreground of the shot we see what looks like the same cameraman moving away from the action of the event, holding the camera above his head. Shots like these inform the viewer that the filmmakers behind this video and this event had access to better cameras, better camera people, and more of them than most early flash mob videos. While this could be inferred by considering how many cameras were needed to document the video as discussed above, when the apparatus remains largely invisible the audience is free to put such considerations out of their mind. Once the viewer sees the cameras in use and the various pieces of information that may come with them- the quality of the camera, the skill with which it is handled, etc- then the constructed nature of the performance is foregrounded to a certain extent. This could be an intentional videographic choice, much like the observable presence of the camera in faux footage horror films. As Benson-Allot observes:

While traditional continuity editing works to obscure mediation and the presence of the camera and thereby produce the thrilling illusion that its subjects do not know they are being watched, faux footage horror foregrounds the presence of the

camera, like reality television...the ostentatious presence of the camera thus secures the pleasing reality of the footage.¹⁴⁴

I doubt that this effect is intentional in the “Lincoln” video. In both of these shots, the camera is not the focus; the cameras are located at the edges of the frame and are not meant to draw attention from the action of the event. They seem to be accidental documentation, caught just inside the shot. However, they do alter the viewer’s perception of the event as authentic and spontaneous as well as potentially reducing the sense of anonymity and incongruity communicated to the at-home spectator. This difference between “Dance” and “Lincoln” also demonstrates that there is more than one way in which flash mob performance and videography constructs and communicates authenticity. I will return to this observation in-depth next chapter.

Occasionally in flash mob videos a performer/spectator films themselves in the moment of performance- the at-home viewer sees that a performer/spectator has turned their cell phone on themselves or their fellow participants, for example, and perhaps the video cuts to that footage in the moments after. Far more common (and I would argue necessary) in flash mob videos is the inclusion of shots of the performance being documented by spectators. “Dance” features many such shots: the 0:52 mark features two spectators in the background filming or taking pictures with their cellphones while another spectator talks on her cell while laughing and dancing to the music, 0:56 features a spectator in the middle of the frame and the performance space using a cell phone to record, 0:59 shows a balcony full of people with cell phones (and one with a still camera who may or may not be one of the cameramen). In fact, for most of the event and choreography shots one can see spectators with cell phones held above their heads on the perimeter of the performance. The final shot in “The T-Mobile Dance” video is of two spectators

¹⁴⁴ Benson-Allot 181

discussing the event with the aid of their phones, one talking and the one evidently displaying pictures or video she took of the performance, as the T-Mobile slogan “Life’s for Sharing” appears under them. Of course, thanks to the anonymity of the event garnered through the gradual addition of chorus members, these shots of spectators could well be shots of performer/spectators; as discussed above, this uncertainty is part of the pleasure for the at-home spectator.

The Lincoln flash mob video features multiple examples of this as well (the 0:39 and the 0:45 marks show spectators holding up cell phones either in the foreground or background), but the clearest and most important instance of it occurs at the 1:07 mark. In this shot, one of the street level cameras stops filming the action of the flash mob entirely and turns the camera on the audience, three of whom are holding cell phones up to capture the event. These non-participants are centered in the shot for two seconds, at which point the camera swings around to reveal the flash mob event. The connection is clear; the camera is suturing the at-home audience’s point of view with that of the “live” audience’s- or at a least, with the live audience’s cell phones. This videography creates this connection first of all by pointing out that the event is worth documenting and therefore worth viewing, and second of all by pointing out that the at-home audience is viewing the event in a similar fashion to the live audience- through a camera lens.

While all of these videographic decisions produce particular effects on the at-home audience, the most important job of flash mob videography is to successfully communicate the three commonalities of flash mob performance- the incongruity of the action, the anonymity of the performer, and the overloading of the space. The incongruity of action is shown in two ways: first through the use of an establishing shot, and second by the use of reaction shots. I have discussed establishing shots briefly. In film, establishing shots are long-shots that communicate

expository information to the viewer- time, location, important objects, concepts, or relationships. In flash mob videography, they serve to communicate similar expository information to the at-home audience by demonstrating the established patterns of the space. Both “Dance” and “Lincoln” utilize an initial long-shot from a high angle to show the standard behavior a person might reasonably be expected to adopt in what will be the performance space. The more readily identifiable these behaviors are, the less time is needed in video to demonstrate them. The setting of “Dance” (a train station) is well known, so a quick shot and a snippet of a PA announcement fulfills this requirement; in “Lincoln,” on the other hand, the street is fairly non-descript, so a longer shot (and the use of undercranking) is needed to show established patterns of behavior. Once established, these patterns of behavior allow the at-home spectator to form baseline expectations which the performance of the flash mob destroys through the performance of incongruous action. Establishing shots are also useful for flash mobs in that they give the most complete view of the performance space itself, a useful perspective for the at-home audience to have when it comes to communicating the overloading of said space.

Reaction shots are usually medium or medium close-ups of spectators viewing the performance with surprise. This surprise can be pleasant or unpleasant, depending on the experience of the Fantastic at work in the spectator; in dance mobs like “Dance” or “Lincoln,” these shots are almost always pleasant, especially later in the videos as the live spectator has already potentially resolved the hesitation of the Fantastic or has enough distance from the performance due to the use of a Protagonist to enjoy it. These shots are often coupled with the spectator recording the event with a cell phone camera, as discussed above. There can be a certain degree of variation in the way these reaction shots are presented. Occasionally there is appropriate footage to produce a classic shot reverse shot; more often it is just slightly off of this

construction in some way (no exact eyeline match, for example). In “Lincoln,” there is a unique and effective reaction shot very early on. At the 0:30 mark, two spectators wander into the performance space. The Protagonist confronts them, dancing in front of them and momentarily blocking their way. Even though the confrontation is playful and the spectators seem to be enjoying it, one rarely sees this direct a confrontation between performer/spectator and spectator; it calls to mind the potential for performer-spectator confrontation in Mob Project-era flash mobs and similar events like Improv Everywhere’s “No Pants” events. Reaction shots in general provide opportunities to demonstrate the Protagonist or live spectator confronting and resolving the Fantastic in addition to communicating incongruity. In this regard, then, the “Lincoln” reaction shot at the 0:30 mark is successful.

Reaction shots also communicate the anonymity between performer and spectator, particularly reaction shots that showcase the surprise of the live spectator. Anonymity is communicated to the at-home audience simply through shots of performer/spectators joining the chorus of performers; as discussed earlier, however, the frequency of these shots in dance mobs complicates the notion of anonymity, eventually sacrificing it in favor of a more framed and readily identified performance (resulting in a shorter and more distanced, therefore more pleasurable, experience of the Fantastic). To communicate the overloading of space requires a bit more teasing out, as there are three different qualities of overloading that a flash mob video can feature: the overloading of the physical performance space itself, the overloading of the cinematic frame, and the overloading of the internal or accidental frame. The overloading of the physical performance space itself is potentially easier to communicate to the at-home audience than to the live one. A live audience may not have an understanding of the established patterns of the space or may be situated in such a vantage point as to reduce the effectiveness of the

overloading. A flash mob performance that is documented and shared as a YouTube video, especially an edited one, can avoid these potential pitfalls through the use of establishing shots as discussed above. These videos can also communicate the concept of overloaded space through the use of framing.

Framing should be examined in depth here as I use it to refer to two different but related effects. The first effect is the frame of the image, what I'm calling cinematic frame. This is the frame that separates what is available for us to view as an at-home audience from what was outside of the frame in the profilmic event. As an example, take the very first seconds of "The T-Mobile Dance" (after the title card) and "The Official Lincoln Flashmob Video - 21st March 2009." On the far left of the screen in "Dance," the at-home viewer can see a staircase, and on the far right of the screen in "Lincoln" the at-home viewer can see a HSBC sign above a doorway. Presumably the "live" audience, if positioned in the same location as the camera documenting this moment, would be able to see farther up that staircase and farther right from that doorway. In other words, the buildings do not end there even though the at-home audience can no longer see them; the frame ends there, preventing the at-home viewer from seeing that building in its entirety. Also presumably, if the cameraperson documenting these moments were to zoom out, thereby expanding the frame, the at-home audience would be able to see more of these buildings. This meaning of frame is more than just shot selection; angling, level, lens selection and exhibition concerns such as aspect ratios all alter the frame and its effect on the viewer. While many of these concern the YouTube audience less than they would a cinematic audience (aspect ratio, for example), they all can aid in the at-home audience's understanding of the overloading of space.

The second effect is the framing that occurs within the shot itself, the frame within the frame. This internal framing is often seen in film and so making a distinction between it and the cinematic frame may seem arbitrary. However, there is a key difference between the internal framing of film and the internal framing of flash mob videos. In film, internal framing is usually of a constructed nature: the tiles on the floor direct the viewer's attention to a certain spot, a key character is highlighted by centering them in a doorframe, etc. The point being, this effect in film is often planned and occasionally scenery is constructed or arranged to achieve the desired result. The nature of flash mobs is that they use pre-existing, often public spaces as their performance sites. Access prior to the event is limited in order to maximize the secrecy of the event; similarly, cameras are often hidden (at least until the performance begins) and placement is usually dictated by the action of the event. Obviously there are exceptions to these situations; "Dance" features a level of cinematic awareness and intentionality that one rarely sees in flash mob videos, but for the most part the anonymous nature of flash mob performance makes this level of production value difficult to achieve. Therefore it would seem there is little opportunity to make conscious framing choices in the design or filming of flash mob events. Nevertheless, one sees this internal framing happen again and again in flash mob videos. Therefore I am calling this second effect internal frame in order to differentiate from its cinematic use.

By way of example of internal framing I present the YouTube video "Bang Bang Flash mob, Sofia, 2009," uploaded by FlashmobBG in January of that same year. A typical bang mob, the video of the performance seems to be shot from a higher floor than the action of the performance itself. One can see that there is a cut-out in the floor of the mall that allows for shoppers on the top floor to see stores on the bottom floor as they are walking. There are many possible reasons this camera position was chosen- to prevent the camera from distracting from

the action of the event, to gain a clear vantage point, because the video is shot by a non-participant who happened to be in that particular location, etc. Whatever the motivation for the camera placement, the result is a somewhat beneficial case of internal framing. At the 1:02 mark and at other moments throughout the video, the lower right portion of the screen is filled with the railing of the upper floor; the action of the flash mob itself is confined to the upper left portions of the screen. This choice of camera location combined with the close-up shooting it necessitates and the canted angle of the cinematic frame results in a compressed, almost claustrophobic view.¹⁴⁵ The flash mob seems to fill more of the space than it actually does, an effect that is vital to the effectiveness of smaller events like this one. The creation of an internal frame within the cinematic frame in “Sofia” enables the successful overloading of space for the at-home audience; it is entirely possible (in this case, even probable) that the physical performance space was not as successfully overloaded. In essence, then, there are potentially three distinct ways in which the overloading of space in a YouTube flash mob video can affect the at-home audience- the overloading of the physical, profilmic space, the overloading of the cinematic frame, and the overloading of the internal frame.

The “Lincoln” video exhibits an awareness of all three of these overloading effects. First, the overloading of the physical space itself. The camera positioned across the street from the performance site is responsible for the establishing long-shot and is responsible for documenting the physical space itself; shots such as 0:53 and 1:41 give clear views of the overloading occurring in the performance site. The overloading of the cinematic frame can be seen at the 0:58, 1:15, and 1:26 marks. The use of medium shots in these moments give the sense that the action is spilling out of the frame; the audience is aware that they are not seeing all of the flash

¹⁴⁵ canted

mob event and so the frame appears overloaded. The overloading of an internal frame occurs at the 1:02 mark. The windowsill obscures the lower portion of the performance space, making the overloading appear even more effective than it may have been as a live event.

Since “The T-Mobile Dance” uses a continuous addition of performers, overloading is constantly being revisited and redefined in its YouTube video. Eye-level medium close-up shots like 0:41 make the at-home spectator anxious that they are missing the whole event by filling the cinematic frame to the edge and obscuring portions of the performance through choice of angle. Shots that the choreography camera placement is responsible for like 0:44 allow the flash mob chorus to overfill the internal frame of squares on the train station floor. Subtle use of zoom-outs like the one at the 0:54-0:57 mark allow the at-home audience to see the overloading of space increase before their eyes. Many of these effects work hand-in-hand during the “Dance” video, especially later as the physical space *and* either the cinematic or the internal frames are overloaded simultaneously. The effect is very similar to and perhaps even greater than what the live spectator would have experienced.

All of these editing choices serve to communicate the commonalities of flash mob performance, the experience of the Fantastic, and the alterations to methodology and reception introduced by “Dance.” There is, however, one major component of the methodology and reception of “Dance” that I have not yet discussed- the fact that “Dance” was purpose-built to serve as an advertisement. It is this fact to which I will turn my attention next chapter.

Chapter 4

Leaving the Fantastic: Flash Mobs, Sponsorship, and Authenticity

Post-“The T-Mobile Dance,” dance mobs became the de facto face of flash mob performance. The viral and commercial success of “Dance” resulted not only in countless dance mob YouTube videos but also in an expanded position within the social consciousness for flash mob performance in general. In 2009 (the same year “Dance” debuted), a dance mob featuring the band Black Eyed Peas and 20,000 performers was a part of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*’s 24th season, while smaller dance mobs were featured in the Season 5 premiere of the Showtime television program *Weeds* and the next year in Season 2, Episode 8 of ABC’s sitcom *Modern Family*. The 2011 Justin Timberlake/Mila Kunis film *Friends With Benefits* used two separate dance mobs, one as the finale of the movie. Dance mobs got their own television series and films in 2011 and 2012 respectively; Howie Mandel’s hidden-camera custom dance mob reality program *Mobbed* debuted on Fox to 10.8 million viewers, while the fourth film in the dance-centric *Step Up* series, *Step Up Revolution*, featured a group of dancers and protesters who referred to themselves as “The Mob” and performed six different dance mobs throughout the course of the movie.¹⁴⁶ Some of the changes to flash mob performance methodology and videography introduced by “Dance”- hidden cameras, choreographed dance as action, the use of a clear Protagonist, and the gradual introduction of performer/spectators- were utilized in similar spatial memes that required a group of performers and incongruous action, like lip dubs and the Harlem Shake.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/fox-orders-howie-mandels-mobbed-173996>

¹⁴⁷ A lip dub is a recorded, usually sparsely edited performance in which a single camera is guided through the performance space usually by one single performer after another. These single performers lip sync to popular music as they move through the space, surrounded by other performer/spectators who fill the frame.

Along with a more codified performance methodology and greater cultural visibility, “The T-Mobile Dance” and the dominance of the dance mob genre also brought with it an increased usage of flash mobs by specific organizations for specific purposes. I refer to this level of involvement by an organization in the creation and performance of flash mobs as *sponsorship*.

Flash Mobs without Anonymity: The Beginnings of Sponsorship

Before I begin my examination of how sponsorship affects the performance and reception of flash mobs, it is important to determine the boundaries of what is and is not flash mob sponsorship. While all flash mobs are initially planned and organized by someone, the performances are usually what I refer to as *unaffiliated*- that is, not performed for the specific and identifiable gain of anyone other than performers or spectators. For example, the Mob Project events were all planned and organized by Bill Wasik. His stated intent was to mock the hipster culture of New York in the early 2000’s. Wasik gained nothing tangible from this; the only thing he gained was pleasure at his own idea, perhaps, just as the performers gained pleasure from being insiders in the performance and the spectators gained a form of pleasure from spectating (though as discussed that pleasure is by its nature riddled with anxiety and confusion due to the spectator’s experience of the Fantastic). The case could be made that Wasik has since capitalized on his Mob Project work, turning it into articles, a book, and increased

Performer/spectators in lip dubs are usually closely connected with the performance space itself- it is their place of work, their school, etc. The Harlem Shake is a recorded performance, generally less than 45 seconds in length. It is characterized by a single performer, often outlandishly dressed, dancing alone to Baauer’s “Harlem Shake” surrounded by other performer/spectators who seem to be oblivious to the incongruous action. Almost halfway through there is a single jump cut to the same performance space now filled with outlandishly dressed performers all dancing. As with lip dubs, the Harlem Shake performers often have a close connection with their performance space- their living room, their office, etc.

visibility for his personal “brand.” However, this monetization seems like a side-effect rather than an intended one, coming years after the *Harper’s* reveal in which Wasik predicted the imminent death of the performance methodology he created.

Speculating on intent can be dangerous, nor is it *my* intent to spend too much time doing so. In fact, intent can be extraordinarily difficult to accurately gauge in many of the flash mob performances I will examine this chapter. In order to sidestep this often unknowable point of origin for flash mobs I will be focusing not on the intended effect of these flash mob but on an analysis of their dramatic structure and the reception of their performances. I will use my own reception of the performances, the comments section of the YouTube videos of the performances, and analyses of the performance methodology and videography of these performances to demonstrate that, while a multiplicity of reception is a given in any flash mob performance, these sponsored mobs are utilizing similar production tactics to mobilize their audiences in ways that benefit the sponsoring organization.

In order for me to consider a flash mob a sponsored mob it must demonstrate an explicit connection to an organization. This in itself can be difficult to determine as many flash mob performances blur the lines between sponsored and unaffiliated. As an example, two flash mobs briefly discussed last chapter can be re-examined: “Where’s Waldo Flash Mob” and “LIVE UNITED Flash Mob @ Union Station Washington DC.” Uploaded on November 11th, 2006, the “Where’s Waldo” flash mob featured performers gathering at San Francisco’s Ferry Building dressed as Waldo from Martin Handford’s massively popular children’s book series “Where’s Waldo?”.¹⁴⁸ As a straight-forward costume mob, the action of the mob is simply appearing at the performance space dressed in a particular way. The “LIVE UNITED” performance is similar;

¹⁴⁸ Sfmallon. “Where’s Waldo Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 Nov. 2006.

uploaded November 18th, 2008, this performance features performer/spectators removing an outer layer of clothing to reveal a white “Live United” t-shirt and then freezing in place. The primary difference is that one of these flash mobs- “Waldo”- is unaffiliated, while the other- “UNITED”- is sponsored.

Correctly interpreting these events as either unaffiliated or sponsored offers different challenges for the at-home and live spectators. For the at-home audience there are clues, first and foremost being that the “LIVE UNITED” video was uploaded by United Way of America’s verified YouTube account. For the live spectator the distinction is more difficult and depends primarily on the individual’s knowledge-base; if one did not know that “Live United” was the slogan of the United Way then there is nothing else in the performance itself that explicitly connects the spectator to the non-profit charitable organization. The performance contains no call to action, no appeal to the spectator for donations or volunteerism. Depending on the spectator, this event could result in as long a stay in the Fantastic as the Mob Project events did. Even for the at-home audience, the videos do not tell the spectator everything. While as an at-home spectator I believe I see the entire “Waldo” and “UNITED” events, the constructed nature of the video (as evidenced by the fact that they are both edited) indicates that there could be elements of the live performance not represented by the YouTube videos: “LIVE UNITED” could have ended with a call to action, “Waldo” could have been organized by the publisher of Handford’s books, by a local bookseller having a sale on children’s merchandise, or by Handford himself. The difference is that while “Waldo” exhibits an explicit connection to a cultural touchstone, “UNITED” exhibits an explicit connection to an organization that relies on individuals and corporations donating their time and money to help the organization achieve its goals. Even though it goes unsaid in the performance, there is an understanding that the organization stands

to gain through the performance of this flash mob. This understanding is gained through the partial loss of performer anonymity.

In order to capitalize on the flash mob performance sponsored mobs must allow the spectator to understand the connection between the performance and its sponsoring organization in some way. This can be achieved through a number of different tactics. First, as in “LIVE UNITED,” a recognizable piece of the sponsoring organization can be visibly utilized- a logo, a slogan, a spokesperson, etc. This works only when the idea or person selected is a highly visible concept and readily connected with the organization. This means sacrificing part of the anonymity that makes flash mobs function; in other words, it is often necessary to sacrifice the effectiveness of the flash mob in order to achieve a greater effectiveness of message. “LIVE UNITED” utilizes the slogan of the United Way but it is not recognizable enough to make the sponsorship explicit, a fact the video of the event itself makes manifest in its final shot of a spectator describing the event as “the freakiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”¹⁴⁹ This statement is one spectator’s description of being inside the Fantastic, and in order to mobilize a spectator for gain a sponsored mob must move them out of the Fantastic and towards awareness. I would argue that “LIVE UNITED” ends up being a better flash mob than a sponsored mob.

Another way sponsored mobs can make their sponsoring organization explicit is by announcing or advertising the flash mob performance beforehand. To a certain extent, this advertisement or announcement exists for all flash mobs in the form of the viral, usually electronic “casting” of the event through forwarded emails, social media, or message boards. Not every person who sees the invitation to a flash mob will become performers, but some might become spectators (or tell their friends, who will become spectators). This group of spectators

¹⁴⁹ United Way. “LIVE UNITED Flash Mob @ Union Station Washington DC.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Nov. 2008.

lack the perfect knowledge of the event that the performers enjoy but still possess a greater awareness of the performance than the average, unaware spectator, leading to a partial loss of anonymity.¹⁵⁰ However, the number of these spectators with partial foreknowledge is limited and is a necessary by-product of the attempt to retain anonymity for the performer through the use of viral organization tactics. For sponsored mobs, in order to achieve positive gain for the sponsoring organization flash mob organizers must not only guarantee enough participation to overload the performance space but also enough spectators to make the sponsorship worthwhile. This means communicating performance details more or less openly with performers and spectators alike.

Connected to this advertisement and announcement of flash mobs is the annualizing of specific flash mob performances. The “Pillow Fight Club - San Francisco” flash mob mentioned in Chapter 3 has become an annual event; every year on Valentine’s Day at around 6pm thousands of participants join a massive pillow fight that has grown so large that it has developed its own rule-set:

Bring a mask or bandanna to cover your mouth – it’s easy to choke on flying feathers.

Bring a synthetic pillow (not one with feathers). Trust us.. it’s much more enjoyable this way.

Bring a garbage bag – have fun and then help clean up afterward – the price of having fun is keeping your city clean and makes it much less likely for the fuzz to shut this thing down.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ See my Chapter 3 mention of the woman in the green dress in the “Lincoln” video.

¹⁵¹ <http://sf.funcheap.com/city-guide/pillow-fight-2014/>

A larger, international event has grown out of the pillow fight flash mobs of San Francisco and other cities. Pillow Fight Day takes place every year simultaneously in over 80 cities worldwide, from Abu Dhabi to Zürich. This annualizing of flash mob performance and the associated media coverage that accompanies it virtually eliminates anonymity between performer and spectator but it ensures massive participation. These events are also a rare case of the unofficial sponsors (the host cities) of the flash mobs gaining more from the performances than the actual sponsors (the organizers of the Pillow Fight Day flash mobs); the real benefit of events like these is increased consumer activity on the day of the performance as well increased visibility for the host city, which explains why San Francisco is willing to pay the estimated \$5000 in pillow fight-related clean-up costs every year.¹⁵²

This brings up the larger questions of what gains are possible for the sponsors of these flash mob performances and what, if any, losses are potentially realized in the case of failure. Sponsored mobs generally function as advertisements for their sponsors, increasing brand awareness and potentially leading to direct commercial gain in the form of increased sales, partnerships with larger corporations, or positive consumer opinion. All of these potential gains (and potential losses, if done poorly) are made possible by the end-goal of all sponsored mobs-sponsoring organizations use flash mobs in an attempt to develop *authenticity*.

Authenticity and Confrontation with the Fantastic: Flash Mobs as Advertisements

Flash mobs and advertising have co-existed to mutual benefit very nearly since their inception. In summer of 2005, Ford launched a series of "surprise" concerts to promote its brand

¹⁵² <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/02/14/sf-pillow-fight-evolves-from-intimate-brawl-to-full-scale-melee/>

new model, the Fusion, launched in August of that year. Featuring artists such as The Roots and Jermaine Dupri, the concerts were organized around flash mob principles. Details such as location and time were announced "last minute" to those who registered on their website or texted "Go" to a specific number to receive SMS "flash alerts," and the concert series even referenced flash mobs directly by taking the name "Fusion Flash Concerts." There is some disagreement about what exactly constituted "last minute" in this case; when Bill Wasik was given an insider look at the first Fusion Flash Concert he discovered that emails concerning the location and time were sent six days prior to the concert and that local radio stations promoted it on-air well in advance.¹⁵³ This usage of flash mobs by a corporate entity was a fear amongst flash mob aficionados (as briefly discussed in Chapter 2).

Wasik, however, saw this sort of sponsorship as not only inevitable but necessary. The flash mob was developed as a kind of social experiment and satire on New York's hipster culture. Wasik believed that the final phase of the experiment would be the adoption of the form by a corporate entity for advertising purposes (he actually expected it to happen in 2004, a year before the Fusion concerts), at which point he would reveal himself as the originator of the initial Mob Project performances and the flash mob would lose efficacy and appeal. Instead, flash mobs not only survived but thrived due to exactly this kind of corporate sponsorship.

Flash mobs have been routinely sponsored by commercial and recreation organizations since the Fusion Flash Concerts. Not only that, flash mob performance and production is now a business unto itself; in 2009, the company Flash Mob America was formed for the sole purpose of creating custom flash mobs for profit. FMA's website makes clear the large and diverse staff necessary in creating a successful sponsor mob including choreography, cinematography,

¹⁵³ Wasik "My Crowd" 61

composers, casting agents, dancers, and advertising, all of which they provide.¹⁵⁴ FMA also provides a mission statement of sorts that defines flash mobs *as* dance mobs by unintentionally referencing the changes to methodology and reception introduced by “Dance:”

We have been defined as Flash Mob Experts, because of our ability to combine creative expression, viral marketing, ease of community organization, and most of all, our unwavering intent to hold true to the very nature of Flash Mobbing which is to give back to the community by bringing everyone closer together. FMA is committed to creating joyful experiences for everyone who participates in and witnesses our events.¹⁵⁵

The creation of a joyful community through the performance of a flash mob is a far cry from the creation of confusion and anxiety featured in the Mob Project performances. “The T-Mobile Dance,” through its creation of distance by the use of a Protagonist and its performance of the resolution of the Fantastic by the continuous joining of performer/spectators, made flash mobs far more welcoming to the spectator and therefore far more inviting to sponsors. An examination of the images on FMA’s website makes the case clearly – every performance picture featured in their gallery or as a design element on their website is a picture of a dance mob.

As my earlier analysis of the “LIVE UNITED” performance demonstrates, the issue with using flash mobs as an advertising tool was that, prior to “The T-Mobile Dance,” at least, flash mobs lacked an identifiable and reliable form. Because the action of each flash mob was different, the spectator could not readily identify them as being part of the same performance methodology. Even the most popular of flash mob genres pre-dance mobs were short-lived and

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.flashmobamerica.com/who-we-are/>

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.flashmobamerica.com/who-we-are/>

niche in their appeal. This resulted in a spectator and potential consumer who spent so much time in the Fantastic that they could not be receptive to the sponsored message of the flash mob performance. This all changed with “The T-Mobile Dance.” The massive viral and commercial success of the advertisement turned the then-accurate statement “flash mobs are diverse performance events” into the now-accurate statement “flash mobs are dance mobs.” Even then, though, flash mobs required explanation; all of the examples of dance mobs in popular media I mentioned at the start of this chapter are prefaced in the narrative of the television program or movie in which they appear by an explanation of what flash mobs are. To the audience of these television programs and movies, however, flash mobs demonstrated a consistent and observable performance methodology- the performance methodology I described in Chapter 3. This meant that flash mobs finally had the one thing sponsors needed to make them reliable as cultural touchstones in advertisements: flash mobs finally had a stable and *authentic* identity.

Authenticity is a concept that is highly sought after by corporations as well as by individuals. It is difficult to define and is constantly in flux culturally speaking, but the ability to demonstrate authenticity in either products or services is vital to the creation of devoted customers. In their 2007 book *Authenticity: What Customers Really Want*, Harvard Business Review authors James H Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II wrote that authenticity is the most dominant of the four consumer sensibilities: in ascending order, availability, cost, quality, authenticity. In other words, all other characteristics of a group of goods or services being equal, the customer will select the one they feel is most authentic. Consumers will go out of their way to support a product they feel is authentic because authenticity is in part a measure of the connection between an individual’s perceptions of their own true self and their perceptions of a product.

Gilmore and Pine use many theoretical groundings combined with market observation to reach this conclusion, but one of the most telling comes from their use of Regina Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Dr. Bendix is a professor of ethnology and folklore, and in her book Bendix notes that the generation of authenticity is an active process of comparing oneself to other people and objects outside oneself.¹⁵⁶ Gilmore and Pine extend this notion to the marketplace by using Bendix as the starting point for companies that wish to provide goods that will be perceived as authentic:

The perception of authenticity remains personally determined, not corporately declared. You cannot assume that customers will see authenticity the same way you do. You must reach inside them to match your offerings ("I like that") with their self-image ("I'm like that").¹⁵⁷

How does a company achieve the perception of authenticity for themselves and their products? Gilmore and Pine state that there are five kinds of experiences that customers regard as authentic-

1. The Natural: untouched and unprocessed, items that are perceived as coming directly from nature or can be purchased or experienced in their natural state. This is regarded as authentic because there can be anxiety on the part of the consumer about man-made products. For example, many foods and beauty products stress their connection to the natural in order to communicate a healthier experience for the consumer's body.
2. The Original: something that has never been done before, an originator. Gilmore and Pine use Apple and their products as an example; even though Apple borrows and

¹⁵⁶ Bendix, Regina. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997),

¹⁵⁷ Gilmore, James H, and B J. Pine. *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 94

refines as much as they originate, the perception is that Apple as a company and family of products is ahead of its time.

3. The Exceptional: something executed at the highest level of quality and skill. Gilmore and Pine use service industry examples like Southwest Airlines here, though I think it could equally be applied to luxury goods like Mercedes-Benz.
4. The Referential: iconic or grounded in history. Referential authenticity often carries with it a sense of verisimilitude, according to Gilmore and Pine. This could be a brand that pays homage to an established classic (anything with retro styling) or a time-honored experience like afternoon tea in Britain.
5. The Influential: not merely trend-setting, this experience of authenticity is derived from a connection to a purpose that is perceived to be larger than the product or practice to which it is connected.¹⁵⁸

These five genres of authenticity (in the words of Gilmore and Pine) will serve as a baseline set of qualifications for authenticity in the performance of sponsored flash mobs. Authenticity is an important characteristic to analyze in sponsor mobs because it directly connects to the potential for beneficial action on the part of the spectator; the more authentic the flash mob is perceived to be, the more likely the spectator is to take action or adopt belief systems that are beneficial to the sponsoring organization. For the purposes of analyzing sponsored mobs, then, authenticity supplements and occasionally takes the place of anonymity in my previously established characteristics of flash mob performance methodology.

I have stated previously that the dance mob was necessary for the effective use of flash mob performance methodology by sponsors. Partly this is because dance mobs provided a

¹⁵⁸ Gilmore and Pine 49-50

recognizable form and a more pleasurable experience for the spectator, but this is not the only reason the dance mob was useful to sponsors. Dance mobs were usable by sponsors as advertisements for causes, products, and services because of the way in which the repeated performance and resolution the spectator's experience of the Fantastic aligns the spectator with the performer/spectators. This alignment extends the performance space into the living rooms of potential consumers. Since the performers of the sponsored mob are under the direction of the sponsoring agency (not to mention the videography, arguably even more important in communicating to the larger, at-home audience), the performer/spectators can be placed in opposition to something- an idea, another group of people, a product, etc. Aligned with the chorus of performer/spectators, the audience can be subtly directed to view this opposing concept as inauthentic compared to the authenticity of the flash mob. Of course, if the sponsor mob fails to establish this authentic connection with the audience there is a potential for backlash against the flash mob and more specifically the sponsor itself, an eruption of conflict between spectator and sponsor akin to the Fantastic tension and potential confrontation between spectator and performer of the Mob Project performances. It is this authentic alignment that I wish to focus on in the next section by looking at four different sponsor mob videos- "The T-Mobile Dance," AT & T's "Dance," "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave," and "Ohio Union Flash Mob."

"Dance," Take Two: "The T-Mobile Dance" and AT & T's "Dance" as Sponsor Mobs

I have already analyzed "The T-Mobile Dance" as a flash mob in the last chapter. This chapter I will be focusing on the ways in which it functions as an advertisement, mobilizing spectators in a way that could be beneficial for the sponsoring organization, T-Mobile. I will be

using conclusions drawn from last chapter's analysis, new analysis of the audience identification and alignment created by sponsor mobs, Gilmore and Pine's theories of authenticity in the marketplace, and the comments section of the YouTube video to show the multiplicity of reception amongst the at-home audience. I will use similar tactics to analyze AT & T's competing advertisement, also called "Dance."

Using Gilmore and Pine's five genres as guide, one can see that "The T-Mobile Dance" does not attempt to establish its authenticity in the Natural; the performance space is entirely man-made and the action of the flash mob (like the action of all flash mobs) is decidedly incongruous and unnatural to the patterns of the space. While it is theoretically possible to stage a flash mob that establishes its authenticity through the Natural, the nature of flash mob performance methodology and the high-traffic public spaces the performances disrupt mean that this genre of authenticity will for the most part be inaccessible to sponsors.

A case could be made that "The T-Mobile Dance" communicates Original authenticity. It certainly was extremely influential to flash mob performance methodology and the continued cultural presence of flash mobs in general; there were no dance mobs before "Dance," after all. But would this originality have been noticed in 2009? Certainly the advertisement and the performance it contained would have been read as unique and one-of-a-kind, but dance mobs as a culturally recognizable performance methodology did not reach critical mass until after the Black Eyed Peas flash mob on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which used the performance methodology pioneered in "Dance" (the episode would later go on to be ranked as the best episode of the long-running, highly-rated talk show by both *TV Guide* and Oprah herself).¹⁵⁹ My

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.oprah.com/own-tv-guide-magazines-top-25-best-oprah-show-moments/TV-Guide-Moment-1-Flash-Mob>

conclusion is that while Original authenticity might have been a contributing factor it was not the driving force behind audience identification with the advertisement.

There is little doubt that “The T-Mobile Dance” exhibits Exceptional authenticity in its performance and production values. The lack of in-person rehearsals that usually leads to a general looseness in performance or lower required skill level in choreography for other dance mobs is nowhere to be seen in “Dance.” As compared to “Lincoln,” the quality of video capture, the skill in editing, the timing of entrances and the logistics of managing the large amount of performers, the nearly synchronous performance by the dancers and the sheer amount of dance styles in the choreography combine to communicate to the audience that “Dance” is a performance of Exceptional skill. What is even more impressive about “Dance” is the fact that this degree of polish and preparation is communicated without the loss of authenticity that can come from over-rehearsal. “Dance” is flash mob that was purpose-built to serve as an advertisement- it is a simulation of flash mob performance in as many ways as it is trend-setting in its performance methodology, a difficult balance to maintain. As discussed last chapter, the success of “Dance” is partly a result of the verisimilitude of the dancers and their convincing performance of their dual roles as performer/spectators. In addition, the invisible apparatus of the performance itself (the hidden cameras, the smart editing, and the slight movement of the camera-people and choice of camera positions that suggest “natural” viewpoints within the space itself) communicates authenticity in its apparent absence. Thus, in the videography there is embedded a subtle call to Referential authenticity as well. This is the primary way in which the spectator is aligned with the authenticity of the performer.

Finally, looking at “The T-Mobile Dance” one would not think that there was any attempt to attain Influential authenticity- no call to a higher purpose or action of real consequence.

However, using the notion of Influential authenticity as a lens to analyze the methodology of “The T-Mobile Dance” reveals what the spectator is being aligned against and how T-Mobile as a company attempts to capitalize on that alignment. In “Making of T-Mobile Dance,” much of the video is devoted to shots of the director and choreographer instructing the performer/spectators on the feeling and emotions they wish to convey in the performance- “energy,” “love,” “what you’re part of is so big,” “the real magic exists in you being able to convince members of the general public to join in and do what you’re doing.”¹⁶⁰ This last statement is revisited multiple times through the “Making of” video, with director Michael Gracey continuously reminding the performer/spectators to “engage” with the non-performing spectators in the midst of the performance and ask them to “join in.”¹⁶¹ These moments of true spectators joining are shown multiple times in “Dance,” and the synchronous choreography combined with the performance of the performer/spectators reinforces this message of community, further aligning the spectator with the performer/spectators.

To discover the object being set against the audience’s alignment with the performers- the object being positioned as inauthentic in comparison to the authentic performance of the flash mob- one must examine the performance space itself. Like lip dubs and the Harlem Shake, sponsor mobs exhibit strong connections to their performance spaces, even more so than in a standard flash mob. In a standard flash mob, the space is important because it informs two of the three characteristics of flash mob performance methodology; one cannot overload a space without understanding its capacity and one cannot perform incongruous action without understanding the established patterns of that space. In sponsor mobs the performance space

¹⁶⁰ lifesforsharing. “Making of T-Mobile Dance.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Jan. 2009.

¹⁶¹ This phrase would later be used by Verizon Wireless, primary cellular competitor of T-Mobile, as their slogan from 2000 to 2002.

takes on an additional level of importance; the performance space of sponsor mobs gives the sponsor something to direct the spectator against.

The performance space of “The T-Mobile Dance” is Liverpool Street Station during rush hour. Liverpool Street Station is a joint railway and Underground station that serves over 57 million passengers yearly, making it the third busiest station in London and a major commuter hub for east London and points beyond. It would have been highly recognizable to its target audience.¹⁶² The establishing shot that begins “The T-Mobile Dance” communicates to the at-home audience the established patterns of a busy train station- commuters hurriedly rushing to and from trains, ATMs or coffee stands, the squeak of trains arriving and departing, the clipped and mechanized sound of the PA announcement. The at-home audience witnesses in the first few moments of “Dance” a world of silent, responsible adults travelling mostly in silence and mostly solitarily, fulfilling their workday responsibilities on a well-kept and well-ordered schedule. In contrast to this dreary scene is the Protagonist, energetically and unapologetically dancing in the middle of the thoroughfare to an easily recognizable and high-energy song. This opposition is the central message of “The T-Mobile Dance;” the advertisement uses the performance methodology of the flash mob to symbolize the authentic as embodied in the performer/spectators (community, joy, the unexpected, the delaying or denial of responsibility and time-sensitive obligations) actively resisting the inauthentic as embodied in the established patterns of the performance space (work, the commute, the urban, the isolated).

How does T-Mobile, the sponsor of “Dance,” benefit from this directed conflict and authentic identification? An analysis of the comment section of the YouTube video demonstrates the difficulty of this question and potentially calls into question the effectiveness of “Dance” as

¹⁶² “The T-Mobile Dance” is a UK advertisement.

an advertisement. In many ways, “The T-Mobile Dance” is a sponsor mob that extends its anonymity to its sponsorship itself; it rarely makes explicit its connection to its sponsor. At the 0:04 mark in the establishing shot (and at two points after, the 0:59 and 2:28 marks), in the bottom left of the screen one can briefly and faintly see the text “advertisement” appear. Until the very end of the video (when the “T-Mobile” logo screen appears), these markings are one of the at-home spectator’s only indications that they are witnessing a flash mob performance purpose-built to function as an advertisement.¹⁶³ This is a tactic one sees in many viral advertising campaigns; these advertisements attempt to gain authenticity by hiding their commercial nature. This can result in very mixed receptions on the part of the potential consumer. An analysis of the very lengthy comments section of “The T-Mobile Dance” (22,268 comments as of January 25th, 2015) reveals that a large portion of the comment page discussion revolves around the video’s nature as advertisement. These types of comments fall into three different categories- those that are offended to find that the video is an advertisement, those that are not offended to find that the video is an advertisement, and those that are confused about whether or not the video is an advertisement.

The first type of comment- the opinion that the performance is cheapened by the revelation of its nature as advertisement- tends to link a hatred of the “The T-Mobile Dance” to the perception of conflict between the flash mob’s authentic nature and its use by corporations. User *Haydn60* writes:

i'm roiling with nausea. the previous flashmob singing and dancing videos i saw
this morning made me weep with happiness and brotherhood. now we get to be

¹⁶³ “The T-Mobile Dance” utilizes multiple shots of spectators interacting with the event through cellular devices in various ways (0:52 describing, 1:52 recording). This flash mob videography motif takes on an additional level of meaning considering that the video serves as an advertisement for T-Mobile, a company that sells cellular service and handsets.

reminded that we share the planet with specimens that could see or experience such a thing and think 'what a great commercial this would make'.¹⁶⁴

Hyperbole aside, this user seems to be making a distinction between the aligned authenticity discussed above, the values that alignment suggest- community, joy, shared pleasure- and the inauthentic experience of commerce. Gilmore and Pine note that commercial activity is by its nature perceived as inauthentic, a major problem that organizations wishing to leverage authenticity must solve. User *danphobic* forwarded a similar argument: "the point of flashmobs is anarchy and people power but this is all staged to sell you stuff by a massive corporation- the opposite of spontaneous and fun."¹⁶⁵ This user demonstrates an understanding of the transgressive nature of flash mob performance but a misunderstanding of the realities of flash mob performance. All flash mobs require a certain level of preparation and planning; by referring to them as "spontaneous" the user falls into the trap of appearances, confusing effect for reality.

Many of the negative comments revolve around the concept that the performance cannot be authentic because of its use as an advertisement. User *AITDS* stated that "this would be cool if the dancing and emotions were genuine" and user *lassforsure* described the event as "a dishonest corporate happening," both connecting with the idea that flash mobs have an authentic and pure form that is being twisted for gain in "Dance."¹⁶⁶ User *55jjjjjjjjj* goes even farther, stating "it's a commercial not real life;" similar to *danphobic*'s comment about the spontaneity of flash mob performance, this conflation of performed action as "real" action is flawed but speaks to the power of the performance methodology at work in flash mob events.¹⁶⁷ As spectators, we want

¹⁶⁴ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁶⁵ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁶⁶ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁶⁷ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

these events to be true, to be authentic, and to forget that they are planned and performed in a specific fashion to engender various responses. This is perhaps the element that connects most with the revelation of the event as advertisement. Many commenters express sadness at this placement; the last minute reveal sours the experience for them, turning their enjoyment of and identification with the authenticity of the performance on its head as the “inauthentic” nature of the advertisement sinks in. As user *Pipehitting* wrote: "When you realise its a commercial it all comes crashing down.... so sad."¹⁶⁸

Those that are not offended by the event's nature as advertisement seem to also be aware of the perceived disconnect between the performance and its use as advertisement. The difference in this second group is that this disconnect does not seem to affect their enjoyment of the performance. User *Xdavidxgrovesx* wrote "i know that this is an advertisement, but it is nice to see this many people so happy and enjoying this!"¹⁶⁹ User *Reklamedamereloaded* offered a bit more conflicted of an opinion- "Even though it's a commercial: One of the best dance-flashmobs EVER!"¹⁷⁰ Even those that decry the use of flash mobs as advertising admit that the performance is effective and highly polished, such as user *limeliter* who wrote "a sneaky commercial T-Mobile but the flashmob was the best."¹⁷¹

While the flash mob succeeds in spite of its nature as advertisement for some, for others it succeeds *because* it is an advertisement. User *eggrawr* posited that it is because of the sponsorship of a major corporation that the performance succeeds: "this is the best (flashmob) ive seen. there should be more flashmobs on youtube that are more professional, synchronized,

¹⁶⁸ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁶⁹ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁰ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷¹ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

and that involves hundreds of people (any other rich companies wana do this?).”¹⁷² User *Andi1424* mentioned that it is "still one of my favourite adverts" and multiple commenters mentioned that this advertisement is a major reason they support T-Mobile.¹⁷³ User *memieko* even analyzed why flash mob performance methodology works so well to advertise cellular service: "The speed of how quick everyone got into the flow is a metaphor to 'getting everyone connected with t-mobile' at least that's what I'm thinking. Pretty ingenious way of advertising through entertainment.”¹⁷⁴ It goes without saying that spectators would be attracted to different elements of a performance, but the users who praised the performance’s nature as advertisement create a useful contrast to the majority of negative commenters who focus on its nature as advertisement over its quality of performance.

Many commenters seem genuinely perplexed about the true nature of “The T-Mobile Dance,” and the point of confusion seems to originate at the exact boundary between the live performance's dispersal and the appearance of the T-Mobile logo and slogan in the closing moments of the video. Some comments indicate that certain users believed the flash mob to be an authentic performance that has been co-opted by T-Mobile. User *cesarjag* wrote: "T Mobile dance? why is it named that? im fairly certain this is not an advertisement for any corporation. the message of these dancers has definitely been manipulated with that labeling.”¹⁷⁵ This observation is two-fold. First, there is the observation that the message or narrative of the live performance is different from the message or narrative of the video of that performance. Second, there is the observation that the message or narrative of the video might not be intended by its “authentic” authors (the performers), making the flash mob function like a quotation taken out of

¹⁷² lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷³ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁴ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁵ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

context. The end result for user *cesarjag* is that the flash mob retains its all-important authenticity, uncorrupted by the manipulative and opportunistic corporate entity revealed in the final moments of the video. Along the same lines, user *WingedSoulies* observes "Theres no t mobile message in this, just dancing."¹⁷⁶ Assuming that this user is not purposefully ignoring the logo reveal, it seems that the perceived disconnect between the authenticity of the live performance and inauthenticity of the video of that performance creates a gap in reception for some audience members. This gap is demonstrated by comments by users such as *Albinonnetailedfox* ("It [the flash mob] was actually real. they did it for the purpose of advertising t-mobile, but it was a true flash mob," which might imply a belief that the flash mob being viewed by the at-home audience is the pro-filmic event itself- no multiple takes, etc) and *CMe901* ("All dancers are payed? or real guys too?" which implies that "payed" dancers would reduce the authenticity of the performance).¹⁷⁷

Finally, there are some users who perceive that the performance is authentic as both a flash mob and advertisement but for whom the narrative of the video as advertisement is ineffectual. For a small minority, the video fails because of a lack of familiarity with the subject - user *darkmagicianawesome*, for example, who asks "is t-mobile a company?"¹⁷⁸ More common are the users for whom the gulf between the performance of the flash mob and the narrative of the video as advertisement is simply too great for any effect to be received. User *dewhistle* admits: "Okay, i finally got around to looking this up...it's cute and all, but can i assume someone has already asked how this sells cell phones?"¹⁷⁹ Along the same lines is user *atomiccheeseburger69*'s comment: "that was cool. i just don't know how that relates to T-

¹⁷⁶ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁷ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁸ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

¹⁷⁹ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

Mobile.”¹⁸⁰ The connection T-Mobile is trying to make as sponsor is that the authentic alignment between spectator and performer is, by extension, an alignment between sponsor and spectator; as evidenced by these comments, for some potential consumers the second alignment can fail even when the first succeeds.

BBDO’s “Dance” advertisement, created for AT&T in 2011, takes a very different approach to achieving authenticity and consumer alignment. The thirty second spot opens with an establishing shot of Grand Central Station in New York. From the first second of the ad there is a noticeable similarity between this “Dance” and “The T-Mobile Dance”; the performance space is a busy train station with similar associations for the spectator familiar with the space, the camera placements on the establishing shots of both videos have a similar elevation and distance, the Protagonist is centrally framed with a cordon of open space around him, and there is a PA announcement just before the performance begins. The differences soon appear, however. In AT&T’s “Dance,” the Protagonist watches the clock strike 12:00, at which point he begins to perform but is never joined by additional performer/spectators. Instead, after performing eleven seconds of a choreographed dance, the Protagonist realizes he has been performing alone and that something is wrong. At that moment he makes eye contact with two noticeably annoyed and unrevealed performer/spectators. He pulls out his cell phone and sees that it is downloading an email titled “Urgent Update” with the body of the emailing warning in large letters “Flash Mob Moved to 12:30.” The Protagonist embarrassedly proclaims “Got it” as the previously shown performer/spectators sigh. The commercial fades to a white screen as voice-over narration speaks the words that appear on the screen: “Don’t be the last to know. Get it faster with 4G.” AT&T’s logo and slogan appear on-screen and the advertisement ends. While this is an effective

¹⁸⁰ lifesforsharing. "The T-Mobile Dance." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 Jan. 2009.

referencing of flash mobs in an advertisement, the commercial is not a sponsored mob nor a flash mob of any kind. Like “The T-Mobile Dance,” this “Dance” was created to be an advertisement; unlike “The T-Mobile Dance,” this “Dance” was not created to be an actual flash mob that could be experienced live or at-home. However, the commercial demonstrates a canny understanding not only of flash mob performance methodology but the ways in which spectators can be authentically aligned to the benefit of a sponsor.

As mentioned above, the Protagonist is never joined by other chorus members due to the fact that his slow cellular network failed to provide him with updated performance details. This breakdown in communication results in a single performer destroying the potential anonymity of the performance. In addition, the performance space is of course not overloaded by the Protagonist’s dance, though it is definitely incongruous (there is one shot of a spectator reacting to the flash mob with confusion at the 0:15 mark). It is to be assumed that the flash mob will not be performed by the large group after this misstep, if the faces of the other performer/spectators are any indication. The commercial reinforces the performance methodology of dance mobs established by “The T-Mobile Dance” at the same time that it directly references and makes fun of the competing advertisement. The Protagonist, meanwhile, becomes the object being aligned against, not only by the potential consumer but by the other performer/spectators as well; he has broken not only the established patterns of the space but the intended new patterns of the space. The potential consumer is aligned not with him but with the other performer/spectators who did not get to perform their moment of joining. The advertisement then points the potential consumer’s frustration at a specific target - the problem of inferior cellular service, which the sponsor, AT&T, can help solve.

How does AT&T's "Dance" establish authenticity? It doesn't, or at least it doesn't through the use of the five genres of authenticity. However, Gilmore and Pine offer up another way to achieve authenticity in the minds of potential consumers: to be authentically *inauthentic*.¹⁸¹ AT&T's "Dance" would have the potential consumer recognize that what they are watching *looks* like a flash mob, but *isn't* a flash mob in reality. In reality, it is a commercial. This fact is foregrounded for the audience by the differences in videography exhibited by the commercial. The first difference in AT&T's "Dance" videography is that the cuts are much faster- the shots are roughly one second in length until the dance begins and even then they only extend an additional second. The shots that comprise "The T-Mobile Dance" often exceed ten seconds. In addition, even though the Protagonist only performs for ten seconds, within those ten seconds the audience is aware that they are not seeing everything that is occurring; the cuts between 0:06 and 0:07 and 0:09 and 0:10 do not match, meaning that information is being left out. This style of editing is noticeably different from the videography one sees in "The T-Mobile Dance."

The second difference in videography is the framing. Objects or people closer to the center of the frame draw more attention; this is a rule that is observed even in the videography of real dance mob performances. In AT&T's "Dance," however, every shot is nearly perfect in its framing of a central person or object: the clock in the center of the performance space is also nearly center frame at the 0:03 mark, the confused spectator is in the same position at 0:15, and the Protagonist is nearly center throughout. This perfection of framing communicates the inauthenticity of the event to the potential consumer. The third difference in videography can also be seen at the 0:03 mark in the form of an impossible camera placement - directly behind the

¹⁸¹ Gilmore and Pine 99

Protagonist's right ear, so close that he is out of focus. This communicates to the potential consumer the highly edited nature of the event; if a camera has been placed there during an actual flash mob performance it would have been visible and anonymity would have been completely sacrificed. The end result of these videographic differences is the realization on the part of the audience that what they are watching is inauthentic and being staged for their benefit. Because the inauthenticity is foregrounded, the potential consumer is free to receive the message of the advertisement.

Like all sponsored mobs, interpreting the message is a question of recognizing who the audience is being aligned with and who or what they are being aligned against. The alignment in "Dance" is achieved through the display of authentic inauthenticity as discussed above. The audience is aligned with the performer/spectators and against the Protagonist who ruined the performance. However, there is a degree to which the advertisement is having its cake and eating it too, so to speak; by making the Protagonist the punchline of the joke, flash mobs are positioned not only as events worth participating in but also events worthy of mockery. This could be connected to the object against which the spectator is being aligned. AT&T's "Dance" is already noticeably similar to "The T-Mobile Dance," which featured an authentic flash mob performance. By showing a failed flash mob in an intentionally inauthentic way, the AT&T advertisement directs the potential spectator into confrontation with T-Mobile, AT&T's business competitor.

Like "The T-Mobile Dance," AT&T's "Dance" uses the performance space to communicate its message, even though it isn't a true sponsored mob. In the AT&T advertisement, a train station is once again the performance space for a flash mob. Once again, the establishing shot communicates hurried travel, time-sensitive requirements and

responsibility. However, these established patterns are not successfully disrupted; the Protagonist's attempts are misguided and ineffectual. This is partly due to the fact that the Protagonist cannot uphold his own time-sensitive responsibilities thanks to his untrustworthy wireless network. The message that is communicated, then, is the reification of the performance space's established patterns and the celebration of the values it suggests. Rather than the communal call of "The T-Mobile Dance," AT&T's "Dance" is a warning to those who wish for community to make sure they are responsible and reliable enough to be worthy of it.

There is one final important distinction between "The T-Mobile Dance" and AT&T's "Dance"- AT&T's dance refers to its event as a flash mob on-screen and "The T-Mobile Dance" does not. I interpret this as a realization on the part of BBDO that, in order to reach as large an audience as possible, the performance methodology that the commercial is simultaneously mocking and celebrating must be defined for the audience. As I mentioned earlier, this defining of flash mobs when they appear in popular media is common practice; it nearly eliminates the Fantastic from the equation completely by giving the spectator all the tools they need to understand what they are witnessing. This raises the question of why "The T-Mobile Dance" does not define itself as a flash mob for the audience. I connect the decision to allow the spectator to experience the Fantastic in "The T-Mobile Dance" as a move towards authenticity. Earlier flash mobs and flash mob videos did not define themselves as flash mobs, save perhaps in their titles; by eschewing a stated definition, "The T-Mobile Dance" connected itself with a longer tradition of flash mob performance while allowing itself to redefine the performance methodology. This is the most telling distinction between the two advertisements; "The T-Mobile Dance" is a flash mob first and a commercial second, while AT&T's "Dance" is a commercial first and a flash mob only by association.

The Authenticity of School Spirit: “Ohio Union Flash Mob” and “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave” as Sponsored Mobs

The next two flash mobs I will analyze - the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” and the “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave” - were not intended to function as advertisements, at least according to their organizers and participants. However, the performances and the videos of the performances seem to have been used as unofficial advertisements after the fact by organizations closely connected to the participants. While most sponsoring organizations are directly involved in the production and performance of sponsored mobs, these two flash mobs demonstrate that, under the right circumstances, flash mobs can be used or interpreted as sponsored mobs after the performance itself.

The “Ohio Union Flash Mob” was performed on May 3rd, 2010, and uploaded to YouTube on May 5th of that year. This flash mob follows established dance mob performance methodology with a few unique variations. The video opens with a two second medium-close establishing shot of various people interacting in the space over which the text "The Ohio Union Monday, May 3, 2010 12:35PM" appears. This is followed by a seven second shot of a male student standing just off-center of the main concourse of the Union; videographically, this should be the Protagonist of the performance (center-frame in empty space, camera at eye-level representing the live spectator's POV). A fair amount of empty space has been created around the Protagonist and he is surrounded by other students who are doing their best to look like spectators. These future performer/spectators are probably responsible for the creation of the performance space. At the 0:10 mark there is an unusual variation that begins the flash mob in earnest; another student comes from off-screen left, leap-frogs over the original student and upon

landing strikes a pose and begins fist-pumping to the music now playing over the PA system – a cover of Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” from the Pilot episode of the popular Fox television program *Glee*. The video cuts to a different camera position to show the true Protagonist, now revealed, dead center of the playing space; this camera position is reminiscent of the establishing shot of “The T-Mobile Dance,” elevated and distant enough to show the entire performance space. The Protagonist is then joined at the 0:16 mark by the original student (a move accompanied by a shift back to the original camera position at a slightly different angle- the at-home audience can see the camera-person moving screen-left at 0:14). A startled student looks up from her schoolwork at 0:18- the first reaction shot- and by 0:21 the Protagonist has been joined by a male chorus of performers roughly ten strong. This segues into another reaction shot (0:22), a far more positive reaction shot (0:28), and finally the entrance of the female chorus of performers at the 0:42 mark.¹⁸²

At the 1:00 mark another influx of performer/spectators occurs. The incongruous action of the flash mob - the dance - is neither fully simultaneous nor fully synchronized; there are many movements performed only by the male or female chorus, or shared movements that are staggered in time or performed facing opposite directions. At 1:30 there is another performer/spectator entrance, this time descending the stairs from a higher floor. They do not perform the full movements of the main chorus on their descent but they do clap in time with the main chorus and move as one- in other words, they are readily identifiable as performer/spectators and not enthusiastic audience members. They finally begin to join the main chorus of performers at the 1:40 mark, filling in the performance space behind the main group of performers and beginning simultaneous, synchronized action by 1:51. Shots like 2:02 display the

¹⁸² This separation of performers by gender is unusual but it does correspond with the male and female solos performed in the song.

chorus of performer/spectators in its entirety. The 2:02 mark also displays the internal framing at work; the performers are not particularly large in number but thanks to the internal framing of the tile, the claustrophobic feel of the upper levels, and the camera position it does overload the frame chosen, if not the performance space itself. At 2:28 the then-president of the university, Gordon Gee, and the school mascot Brutus are revealed. They do not perform synchronous or incongruous actions but they do interact with the performers, who split into two groups to make an aisle for their entrance. At 2:48 it is revealed that there is another group of performer/spectators performing on the second floor; how long this chorus has been performing is unclear in the video. At the 2:52 mark the dispersal begins and the space's established patterns begin to reassert themselves. By 3:09 the video has gone mostly black so that full credits (quite unusual, and top-billing the choreographer) can roll.

The “Ohio Union Flash Mob” appears to be a fairly straight-forward, authentic dance mob and video. Like all sponsored mobs it is in an analysis of the performance space and its connection to the performance that its narrative is revealed. While “The T-Mobile Dance” did not reveal its nature as advertisement until after the dispersal (a decision which resulted in some confusion in reception), the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” has no such reveal. It does identify itself as a flash mob in the title of the YouTube video but it does not identify itself as advertising, either in the video or the description. However, the context of the flash mob performance calls into question its authenticity. On March 29, 2010, Ohio State University opened its new student union, a 320,000 square foot structure eight years in the making. The new union building cost \$118 million, \$90 million of which was covered by an increase in student fees (\$25-27 quarterly per student).¹⁸³ While the flash mob does not claim to be advertising the new union, its choice of

¹⁸³ http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/03/post_244.html

performance space draws attention to the new building thereby unintentionally opening the performance and video to interpretation as a sponsored mob by spectators.

The performance choices made for the flash mob also blur the line between unaffiliated and sponsored. Most of the chorus members (including both the false and true Protagonists) wear Ohio State University paraphernalia or school colors. The school logo or name is featured prominently in many shots, both in the form of costuming and on banners reading "Welcome Home" and "Ohio Union" hung in the space. One of the front row performers seems to be a school cheerleader and the routine's choreography looks similar to those seen in cheer routines and competitions. Those performers not in school-related gear appear to be actual employees of the union itself (see the man far screen-left at 0:22). This use of employees of the performance space can be seen in "The T-Mobile Dance" as well but their effect is different here. Part of that difference in effect is tied into the appearance of the university's president and mascot. Gordon Gee began his second tenure as president at Ohio State October 1, 2007; his salary at Ohio was the highest for a paid public university president in the US, and the year before this flash mob was performed he was named Best College President in the Country by *Time* magazine. He is accompanied by the Ohio State University mascot, Brutus Buckeye, who as a mascot for an NCAA Division I-Big Ten university has appeared in numerous commercials as well as video games. The appearance of Gee and Brutus might communicate to the spectators that the flash mob is at least endorsed by the university at the highest level, if not directly sponsored by it.

However, there are elements of both the performance and the videography that conflict with this interpretation of the event as a sponsored mob. The choreography of the "Ohio Union Flash Mob" is quite complex, requiring chorus members to perform moves asynchronously. The reason most dance mobs utilize synchronized and simultaneous action is that it simplifies the

performance for non-professional performers; if a single performer forgets their next move, they can simply look to their neighbor and follow their movements. In asynchronous choreography the possibility for error increases dramatically; a single performer forgetting their next move throws off intricate patterns and timing. The other side to this, however, is that this choreography is only challenging for non-professionals. In addition to utilizing far more chorus members (itself a mark of success and preparation in flash mobs), “The T-Mobile Dance” exhibits an unnaturally high level of skill and precision. Dancers are gradually added in very small numbers (often singly) and the choreography, while simultaneous and synchronized, moves through multiple styles, including a partnered dance section. The “Ohio Union” performers generally enters in large groups and the choreography, while asynchronous, is performed competently but amateurishly; there is a general looseness and lack of precision in the movements, as if the focus was positioning rather than style.

There are very few close-ups of individual performers in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” video; the choreography is showcased, as mentioned above, by the patterns and grouping of bodies, not individual performances. “The T-Mobile Dance,” on the other hand, features multiple close-ups and medium shots of individual performer/spectators. This showcases not only the precise movements of the chorus members but also their expressions and personalities- their performance as actors, if you will. The “Ohio Union Flash Mob” does not allow the audience to become familiar with individual personalities. Faces are almost never the focus, except in audience reaction shots, perhaps explaining some of the precise costuming choices (the union employee, the cheerleader, the student with the backpack); it reduces the performers to types. The video features only one very quick shot of the event being videotaped by non-participants. Videographically, this absence is unusual and communicates (I would say unintentionally) that

the performance is somehow not worth capturing. There is a cameraperson clearly visible in shot at the 0:14 mark and at many other moments throughout the video, but their proximity to the performance and the visibility of their apparatus is potentially unnerving to the spectator; it communicates neither the spontaneous capture of Mob Project-era flash mob videos like “Pillow Fight Club – San Francisco” nor the edited but invisible capture of dance mobs like “The T-Mobile Dance.” Finally, the quick cuts of the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” video communicate a commercial purpose but the length of the video and use of nearly a minute’s worth of full credits after the dispersal complicate that interpretation.

The end result of all of these mixed messages in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” video is a loss of authenticity. One can see that the performance and video lack a clear connection to any of Gilmore and Pine’s five genres of authenticity; “Ohio Union” displays no Natural qualities as per usual with flash mobs but it also fails to show Exceptional production value. Furthermore, the use of standard dance mob performance methodology combined with a cover of a classic rock song from a popular television program eliminate any appeal to Original authenticity and the flash mob lacks a Referential verisimilitude in part due to the overuse of recognizably branded clothing and costume choices. There is no higher, Influential call at work in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob,” nor is it authentically inauthentic in any clear way.

The lack of perceived authenticity in “Ohio Union” means that the at-home spectator is not aligned with any of the performer/spectators.¹⁸⁴ Because of this, the spectator cannot be mobilized in any useful way by a sponsoring agency. The performance space itself is being celebrated; the incongruous action of the flash mob seems not incongruous enough to break the established patterns of a space which seems impossibly welcoming and idyllic (qualities that few

¹⁸⁴ The live spectator may be aligned simply because of their shared attendance of Ohio State University.

would want to disrupt). In theory this would be useful to a sponsor in advertising the university and its new union; in reality it weakens the narrative of the flash mob and makes aligning the spectator against something connected to the performance site difficult. Without a successful authentic alignment, the at-home spectator has no context for what action or belief the sponsored mob is asking them to take or adopt. Reaction shots stop appearing early in the video which, combined with the decision to introduce performer/spectators in large groups instead of singly and gradually, leads to moments that seem inauthentic and overly staged. The at-home spectator has no one to align with and nothing to align against. As a result, its usefulness as a sponsored mob is greatly reduced. The mixed messages and lack of authenticity in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” have another result; confusion and frustration on the part of the at-home audience. Just like in the Mob Project events, this confusion and hesitation regarding the nature of the “Ohio” event eventually manifests as a redirection of those feelings towards the performer/spectators.¹⁸⁵ This can be seen in the large amount of negative comments on the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” YouTube comments section.

Many of the comments in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” comments section focus on violence. Multiple users make the connection to the Philadelphia flash mobs of 2009 and 2010, which I will return to in my Conclusion. User *DrugsMakeYouStupid* posts: “They do Flash Mobs differently in Philly. Young black kids destroy property. It’s far less entertaining.”¹⁸⁶ This is one of the more genteel comments about those violent events posted in this comments section; there are many, most of which involve racially charged language and accusations, all of which have little to do with the performance of this dance mob. It is natural that such violent and publicized

¹⁸⁵ This hesitation and confusion is experienced without a confrontation with the Fantastic, as explained previously.

¹⁸⁶ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

national events would be in the minds of at-home viewers; however, I speculate that it is the lack of authentic alignment and the resulting confusion in reception in the “Ohio Union Flash Mob” that perhaps enables comments and connections like these.

User *IIIIIIIIII* connects the Ohio Union event to another flash mob turned violent: "WELL AT LEAST THE NAZI COPS DIDNT SHOW UP AND BODY SLAM THE KIDS AND TAZE THEM AND HOSE THEM WITH PEPPER SPRAY. CHECK OUT THE DANCE AT THE JEFFERSON MEMORIAL."¹⁸⁷ Referencing the 2011 silent rave at the memorial that resulted in arrests and police brutality allegations, this user connects the violence not with the performance but with the legal response to flash mob events. Occasionally, especially in earlier mob videos, users question the legality of these performances and the potential responses they might require. However, the users do not often connect the legal response with violence as one sees in this video's comments section. Nor does one often find users suggesting violent action in response to such exhibitions of control: user *seeifthisoneworks* suggests "Flash mob next week, downtown. Group one will roll over cars, group two will be doing the window breaking and fire starting. Bring Molotov cocktails and rocks to throw at police."¹⁸⁸ Flash mobs are transgressive and potentially threatening by nature; as mentioned in Chapter 2 they have been linked with the possibility of political action since their beginnings. However, there is a gap between co-opting a Wasik mob with calls for peace and attempting to organize a violent, resistant flash mob, however satirical that attempt is meant to be. This gap cannot be wholly explained by differing political climates; this change may be engendered by the confusion in reception of the “Ohio” performance.

¹⁸⁷ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

The comments that do not directly concern themselves with violence fall into the pro, anti or unconcerned/confused viewpoints seen in the responses to “The T-Mobile Dance.” Many comments respond to the mixed messages regarding sponsorship sent by the “Ohio Union Flash Mob”: “Was this a school, who made this flashmob?” and “Was this for fun or was it for an event?”¹⁸⁹ Other users ignore intent and focus on the fact that the flash mob could be used by a sponsor with little effort, though to what effect is questionable in my mind. One user posts “Kudos to Gordon Gee, What a recruiting tool, OSU has a great academic program and if I was say 16, 17 or 18 and trying to decide between OSU and another University and saw this video, it would definitely sway my decision.”¹⁹⁰ Another user notes that the video received “Almost 1.9 million hits and it cost no more than a few steadicams and fifteen minutes of the president's time. Talk about a brilliant stroke of free advertisement for the university.”¹⁹¹ Many of the negative comments also note the potential usefulness of the performance as a sponsored mob, while other negative comments assume that the flash mob was built specifically for that purpose: “So... this would be a LOT cooler if it wasn't so obviously organized by OSU, just to be used as an advertisement for how ‘awesome’ their school is. That fact makes it kind of lame.”¹⁹² Other negative comments specifically call out certain aspects of the video; the preponderance of cameras receives a great deal of attention, leading to the video being received as “overproduced,” “commercial,” and “lacking the DIY quality of other flashmobs” or being connected with another sponsor entirely in the case of one comment: “Glee has really good advertising people.”¹⁹³

However, the negative comment that references the lack of authentic alignment most directly

¹⁸⁹ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁹⁰ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁹¹ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁹² Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁹³ Wcmhnb4. “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

comes from a user who disparages the event not because of any production choices but because of a rivalry based on flash mob performance: "This looks like college musical. Sorry to disappoint you osu, but UNC has been doing the flash mob thing for a while, only difference is, ours is legit. search UNC rave in library."¹⁹⁴

A search for "UNC rave in library" on YouTube reveals the "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave" video amongst a number of other similar titles. This particular video was uploaded to YouTube on December 10th, 2008, and documents the performance of a flash mob in which students at the University of North Carolina briefly took over a library and held a rave during finals week on December 9th of that same year.¹⁹⁵ This flash mob, unlike the others under examination this chapter, is not a dance mob, meaning it lacks the identifiable Protagonist and the use of performer/spectators that usually allows for authentic alignment. "UNC Chapel Hill" also primarily follows the videographic traditions of Mob Project-era videos like "Pillow Fight Club – San Francisco." Despite all this, the flash mob and the video capturing it demonstrate that while the dance mob is generally better suited for use as a sponsored mob, other genres of flash mobs can be utilized successfully in this fashion if authentic alignment is achieved and the sponsor has a strong understanding of their potential audience.

The "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave" video begins with an establishing shot of the patterns of the space – The Robert B. House Undergraduate Library - empty except for a single student; the camera appears to be handheld, as there is a bit of camera-shake as it pans to the right. The score is present from the opening shot- the popular 1999 trance song "Sandstorm" by Finnish artist DJ Darude. At the 0:05 mark, the video cuts to a title screen with nine seconds

¹⁹⁴ Wcmhnb4. "Ohio Union Flash Mob." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 May 2010.

¹⁹⁵ A rave is a party that features live music or a DJ. Raves are connected historically with underground, secretive parties that were connected with drug use or alcohol. For the past three decades they have featured electronic music and usually visual effects of some sort- strobe lights, fog machines, etc.

of type-text establishing the performance context: “On December 9th, 2008 in order to break up the stresses of exam week, hundreds of UNC students descended in the Undergraduate Library in a flashmob rave.”¹⁹⁶ At 0:15 the video fades up to the actual performance space, also empty, cutting to a second floor above the performance space at 0:20 with the text “11:00 PM” appearing bottom-center at 0:22. The video crossfades from another shot of the empty performance space to the flash mob event at 0:29. The mob fades in mid-action. There is no creation of a performance space by future performer/spectators documented nor an entrance of the performers; by the time the cross-fade finishes, the performance space is already overloaded by crowd-surfing and dancing undergraduates. The POV is singular and stable from this point forward, shot from the previously shown second floor (which is revealed in this shot to be a viewing area for the live audience). Flash bulbs and cellular capture of the event are immediately seen both from the second floor audience as well as from chorus members. It should also be noted that this is the first time diegetic sound is heard in the video.¹⁹⁷

Proof of the efficacy of the mob is seen at the 0:57 and 1:02 marks as the action spills out of both the physical frame of the performance space and the cinematic frame of the video. The first reaction shot comes at 1:06 – a library worker is shown outside the perimeter of the performance space, looking on in what appears to be amusement. The camera zooms in on a crowd-surfer holding a book at 1:20, reminding audiences of the established patterns of the space and contrasting them with the action of the mob. At 1:27 the video switches to overcranked, or slow-motion, footage without diegetic sound, and at the 1:42 mark the camera focuses on multiple students dancing on a library desk, the borderline between performers and audience. At

¹⁹⁶ Cackalacky789. “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

¹⁹⁷ By diegetic I mean what it sometimes referred to as “Actual” sound- that is, sound that is identifiably coming from on-screen or off-screen characters. The music in “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave” seems to be inserted in the editing process, making it almost impossible to know what the flash mob sounded like live.

1:51 there is another reaction shot, this time in the form of a policeman shown escorting a student off a desk as he fingers what appears to be a pair of handcuffs.

There is an inexplicable lighting shift at 2:19, and at 2:29 the video shifts back to real time and diegetic sound returns. At 3:24 the video cuts the diegetic sound back off as it shifts back to overcranked footage. At 3:39 the video fades to a black screen with more inter-title type-text similar to the 0:05 mark, advertising that the event could not end without some "school spirit." This is documented in the video at the 3:44 mark as it cuts back to real time and diegetic sound as the spectators and performers alike perform the school's famous "Tarheel" chant. At 3:55 the video fades out to another type-text screen with diegetic sound continuing under, then the video fades back in at 3:56 to the performers singing the University of North Carolina's fight song and congratulating themselves. The video ends with a slow fade to black at 4:26 featuring more type-text (the end credits), which explain that "This has been a UNC Student TV Production. And as always..." as the diegetic sound of the fight song concludes with the chorus of performers and spectators yelling "Go to Hell, Duke!"

I would like to return for a moment to the YouTube comment that ended my discussion of the "Ohio Union Flash Mob" - the claim that UNC's flash mobs were "legit." Using Gilmore and Pine's five genres of authenticity this claim is demonstrably true. While "UNC Chapel Hill" cannot claim a Natural (the performance space is man-made), Original (neither the first rave nor the first flash mob rave), or Exceptional authenticity (the videography and individual performances are charmingly amateur), the flash mob does exhibit a truly Referential quality; in short, the performance seems to be exactly what it claims to be (a rave), and what it claims to be is readily identifiable. What's more, the flash mob's referent has a perceived authenticity of its own that the "UNC Chapel Hill" performance and video gain by association. For example, there

is the foregrounding of potential danger. The video's title refers to the flash mob as a rave, a word loaded with dangerous associations; as a result, the at-home viewer is prepared to interpret the event as transgressive even before the video begins playing. The opening shots of the video show a performer crowd-surfing. This particular chorus member is seen repeatedly covering her mouth, a common indicator of shock, fear, and excitement. She is also repeatedly shown tugging her shirt down as it rides up from contact with the performers who are supporting her. This calls to mind issues of harassment and abuse along gender lines common in crowd-surfing and rave environments. This sort of behavior can be seen later both in the behavior of the performers (a male performer pretending to spank a female performer as she dances at 3:21) and in the shot selection (female performers dancing on the library desk at 1:44). In addition, the second crowd-surfing performer shown in the video is dropped to the floor center-frame at the 0:55 mark. All of this combines to make the potential danger visible and therefore a reality for the at-home audience.

The action is not completely synchronous. What this communicates to the at-home viewer is that performers have a greater degree of autonomy. Compare this to individual performer/spectators in dance mobs like “The T-Mobile Dance” and the “Ohio Union Flash Mob.” Performer/spectators in these dance mobs are expected to perform synchronous, choreographed movements; their actions are rehearsed and their identities are connected to the chorus of performers at large, thus reducing the perceived threat of uncontrolled individual action. The incongruous action of the “UNC Chapel Hill” flash mob is expected to exist along an understood spectrum- rave behavior- but that spectrum allows for a great deal of individual choice as can be seen in the video (performers crowd-surf/support crowd-surfers, interact with objects in the environment, dance individually or in groups, utilize props and costumes, etc). The

performers seem authentic in their individuality and authentic in reference to established patterns of their referent (though obviously not in reference to the established patterns of the performance space). The result is an at-home spectator that readily accepts the authenticity of the performance because of the clearly referential behavior (“I understand what a rave is, and this looks like a rave”).

The “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave” video succeeds in communicating authenticity to the at-home spectator, but to whom is it aligning that spectator, and to what is it directing that alignment against? Much like in Mob Project-era videos like “Pillow Fight Club – San Francisco,” I believe the at-home spectator is being aligned with the camera itself. The “UNC Chapel Hill” video appears to be constructed from a single POV; even the establishing shots of the empty performance space appear to be shot from the second floor, just a few steps away from where the rest of the action of the mob is documented. This communicates to the audience that the event is captured on a single device, a device which is invisible and eye-level, representing the live spectator. Editing is present in the video but it is simultaneously foregrounded and undermined; the early use of titles, non-diegetic sound, fades, and overcranking satisfy the at-home audience’s desire for music video-style polish and production value while the lack of a complete capture of the performance and the use of “real-time” typing of the titles make the recording of the performance feel immediate and spontaneous. The few reaction shots utilized are of adult authority figures connected with the performance space itself – library employees and campus security or police. The “UNC Chapel Hill” video maintains an important balance in creating its narrative in these shots; the authority figures are both visually aligned against the performers and visibly amused by the action of the flash mob. This dichotomy is mirrored in the rave behavior that is incongruous to the performance space and the

actions of the performers later in the video that reify the space and its established patterns- the chanting of “Tarheel” and the singing of the university’s fight song. The narrative created is that the flash mob is both transgressive to the space and proud of the space’s traditions; this is similar to the “rebel consumer” narrative of the Mob Project events so attractive to the hipster performers. This mixed message, unlike the mixed messages in the “Ohio Union” flash mob, works to prepare the at-home spectator to become a potential consumer. The Referentially authentic action of the flash mob allows the at-home spectator to leave the Fantastic quickly due to its framing of the performance (a flash mob) as similar to another kind of event (a rave), leading to a pleasurable experience and a desire to align with the performers. However, the lack of a Protagonist and the absence of a performed experience of the Fantastic combined with the single camera videography result in relatively low distance between at-home spectator and the action of the flash mob; the spectator wishes to join the performers but cannot, physically or by proxy (as seen in the use of performer/spectators in dance mobs like “The T-Mobile Dance”). All that is left for the at-home spectator is the frustrated desire to join; this leaves the spectator in a very receptive position for a potential sponsor, in this case, the University of North Carolina.

One of the most repeated questions in the comments section of the “UNC Chapel Hill” YouTube video is “how was this organized?”¹⁹⁸ Viewers are drawn in by the authenticity claims of the video and attempt to get closer to the live event by finding out more information. For example, user *kmh1207*, after praising the event and the school at large, asks “Was it planned by the library staff or did students just kind of revolt?”¹⁹⁹ This is answered by user *Defensor527*, presumably a student at the university: “More along the lines of revolt...I heard the cops talking with the librarians after, they were like ‘at first I thought this was spontaneous, but now I’m not

¹⁹⁸ Cackalacky789. “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

¹⁹⁹ Cackalacky789. “UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

so sure'. rofl facebook organization=win."²⁰⁰ The use of "revolt," the explanation of the police's befuddled response and the true nature of the event's organization continue the narrative of authenticity. The fact that the event was planned via Facebook is confirmed by multiple users, including *RedLI3* and *AndrewTraceur*. *AndrewTraceur*'s response is worth examining further, as it comes in defense of the event. Some users ask questions in an attempt to debunk the authenticity of the event, as seen often in the "Ohio Union" video's comment section. These users are less prevalent here and much more polite in their questioning. User *nojok3* begins his questioning with praise: "This is awesome but...how is it that no students were in the library at 11pm during finals week?"²⁰¹ This prompts user *AndrewTraceur*'s explanation that the performance space was only one of eleven libraries on campus, the next day was reading day, and that the Facebook event that invited the chorus members also discouraged audience members from entering the space at large "until the very last minute."²⁰² User *Ronpaulkid*'s questioning of the event's authenticity does not mince words, and actually receives a response from the user who posted the video: "Did security and teachers know about this prior to the event or was it a legit flash rave?" to which user *cackalacky789* responds "This one was the only true flashmob rave at UNC. The second and third ones were known about by library workers and police; but none have ever been organized by anybody else but students."²⁰³ The one truly aggressive user who responds negatively to the video is shut down by user *Jagsdrummer*: "let them have their fun in college, its people like you that rob kids of great memories made in college."²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰¹ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰² Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰³ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰⁴ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

These "great memories made in college" are very much on the minds of a group of users who equate the event with happy memories of UNC or great expectations as future students. User *NutriciouslyHigh* remarks "Oh, wow. This school seems fuckin fun. Glad I got in, definitely my number 1 choice now."²⁰⁵ User *hjkimcj93* proudly boasts "Hell yeah I'm going to this school next year aw yeeeeee CLASS OF 2015!" to which user *wrmckeen* advises "Enjoy it! I was there for this! Best years of your life buddy!"²⁰⁶ Missing from these comments, however, is the discussion of commercial intent that accompanies the "Ohio Union" video. The at-home users never insinuate that the flash mob might have been staged for the university's benefit beyond the hesitant questioning of authenticity mentioned above. The "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave" establishes its authenticity so well that, despite the presence of school colors, songs, and sponsorship in the form of campus television production, users never remark on the potential commercial gain which the performance and video could generate. The only comment that broaches the subject is from user *manderrs23*: "I went on a college visit to unc a couple weeks ago and my tour guide told us about this."²⁰⁷ The "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave" demonstrates that, by successfully demonstrating authentic alignment, any flash mob can be successfully utilized as a sponsored mob, with or without the intent of its creators.

²⁰⁵ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰⁶ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁰⁷ Cackalacky789. "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Dec. 2008.

Conclusion

On October 8th, 2011, Twitter user @dougall tweeted “Blame @billwasik for inventing the flashmob #londonriots” to which Bill Wasik replied “Actually, blame the guy who invented the riot.”²⁰⁸ While Wasik’s potential legal culpability for the London riots is non-existent, the fact that so many have conflated flash mob performance with riots and protests like the Occupy Wall Street movement indicates that there may be common ground which could be productively analyzed. I have argued in this dissertation that the experience of the Fantastic in flash mob performance can lead to tension, confusion, and the potential for violent confrontation between spectator and performer. While the dance mob form largely defuses that tension, the potential for violence remains, whether intentional or unintended. The realization of the range of that potential can be seen in a number of flash mob performances, some of which I will now briefly discuss.

The Philadelphia South Street flash mobs of 2009/2010 are one of the most high profile flash mobs to erupt in violence. Multiple times in a two year span, gatherings of large groups of young people converged in the area after Tweets went out advising people to “Come to South Street.” Each of these events resulted in injuries, robberies, destruction of property, arrests, and eventually an under-18 weekend curfew with the threat of fining parents whose children were found breaking that curfew. Similarly violent flash mobs have occurred in New York, Chicago, and Kansas City, among others. The root cause of these events is often unclear; it appears in at least the initial Philadelphia South Street flash mob that a dance group initially sent out the

²⁰⁸ The use of the number sign in front of a word on Twitter and Facebook is called a hashtag. Hashtags indicate a connection to an ongoing meta-conversation that every user of that program can add to or participate in through the use of that hashtag.

Twitter invite, but how that grew to become an epidemic of similar events all located in the same general area is arguable.

There have been initial studies made in regards to the connection between violence and flash mobs. J. Brian Houston of the University of Missouri's Department of Communication produced a study that focused on the causes of the Kansas City flash mobs of 2011 that resulted in gun violence. In the course of their interviews and research, his team found three common qualities that appear to contribute to the likelihood of flash mob violence:

Youth boredom: Youth indicated that a variety of activities are missing from their inner city neighborhoods. Lack of transportation to "fun" or safe places and lack of community afterschool programs contribute to boredom.

Inner-city gangs and crime: Youth in the study indicated that violence from their communities can infiltrate other areas of the cities. This violence also can be facilitated by new mobile technologies.

Historic loitering and "cruising": The tendency for youth to meet and hang out in groups is not new; however, social and mobile media are facilitators of the rapid ways in which these flash mobs organize and take place.²⁰⁹

Sometimes this connection between flash mobs and violence is driven by intentionally illegal behavior; such is the case of the mob-based robberies known as "flash robs." These are events in which a group of people enter a store *en masse* and steal as much merchandise as they can as quickly as they can. The first of these events seems to have occurred in Washington DC in 2011 but they have rapidly spread since then. The overloading of the space provides a measure of anonymity and introduces hesitation, as I discussed earlier, and the brevity of the event makes

²⁰⁹ <http://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2014/0716-expert-available-mu-researcher-offers-new-perspectives-on-violent-flash-mobs/>

reaction difficult. These events might also benefit from the increased cultural visibility that flash mob performance has possessed post-“Dance;” if the spectators of a flash rob- the store clerks and other shoppers- perceive in the entrance of a large group of people that they are about to witness a flash mob, that expectation may align them with a more inactive mode of spectation, therefore enabling the robbery to occur more successfully. Here we might be witnessing a way in which flash mob performance, even though it has built up twelve years of cultural familiarity, can still subvert Bateson’s metacommunicative tell “This is play” to the advantage of the performers- assuming, of course, those performers want to engage in illegal behavior.

The attempts to regulate the legality of flash mobs and respond to breaches in that legality is another potential area for further research. In June 2014, the American Bar Association published a book by Ruth Carter entitled *Flash Mob Law: The Legal Side of Planning and Participating in Pillow Fights, No Pants Rides, and Other Shenanigans*, providing flash mob organizers, sponsors, and performers a handbook for avoiding potential legal pitfalls. Various states have introduced legislation regarding flash mobs, including Illinois’ 2013 law that triples the potential jail time organizers of violent flash mobs might receive. Bill Wasik himself offered up advice on how to reduce the frequency of flash mobs; he suggested that not releasing the videos of these flash mobs online might eliminate some of the appeal, connecting the events with a desire to be seen performing (a connection I think is both apt and worthy of exploration).

While violence and illegality in flash mobs seems to connect most clearly with the overloading of space, a productive connection could be made between the anonymity between spectator and performer that originally helped define flash mobs and the anonymity between contributor and reader that defines for many the experience of web-based communication. The anonymity that chat rooms, forums, and comments sections provide seems to enable and attract

those users who wish to provoke a response in others through potentially transgressive behavior (not-so-lovingly referred to as “trolling”); it seems possible to connect that behavior with flash mob performance through a focus on the intended reception of both acts. An expanded examination of the connection between denial of service attacks and similar hacks in digital space and the incongruous repurposing of space that occurs in flash mob performance could be similarly fruitful.

For me, the primary question raised by violent flash mobs, flash robs, riots, and Occupy Wall Street events is a simple one- are they *actually* flash mobs? The protean nature of flash mob performance has been observable since the Mob Project events, and its slow codification into genres and, eventually, a single dominant and recognizable form has made identification and definition difficult. Even identifying the key components that mark flash mobs as performance- the restoration of behavior, the use of “dark play,” and the cultural and physical framing that surrounds the events themselves- does not provide a definition capable of being applied to the whole range of flash mob performances. It is only by focusing on the aesthetic effect created by these performances- the spectator’s experience of the Fantastic, whether lengthy or limited- that we can create a definition wide enough to accommodate all genres of flash mob without diluting the term to the point that any gathering of more than ten people in a public space is considered a flash mob.

The earliest flash mob performances- the events masterminded by Bill Wasik in 2003 and collectively known as the Mob Project- were a practical joke/social experiment intended to mock the hipster sub-culture of New York in the early 2000s. The eight Mob Project events, while diverse in their actions and performance sites, share three commonalities in their performance methodology: the anonymity between spectator and performer, the overloading of performance

space, and the repurposing of that space through the performance of simple but incongruous action. The anonymity of the performers erases much of the metacommunicative framing that would mark the event as performance, putting flash mobs into the unsettling realm of Schechner's "dark play." The overloading of the performance space reduces the physical and psychical distance between performer and spectator, introducing a sense of danger. Finally, the performance of incongruous action overturns the established patterns and social expectations of the performance space, confusing reception by sending mixed signals about the nature of the event. These three qualities combine to create an experience for the spectator similar to that of the Fantastic- an encounter with a seemingly unexplainable rupture in expected behavior that is simultaneously pleasurable and upsetting.

As the performance methodology of flash mobs has evolved, so too have these three commonalities been modified by organizers to create a slightly different experience of the Fantastic. The launch of YouTube in 2005 allowed a much larger, mediated audience to experience flash mob performance. In addition, the airing of T-Mobile's flash mob television commercial "Dance" (and its subsequent viral sharing through YouTube and other social media) created a sea change in the performance methodology and reception of flash mob. The use of a single initial performer- the Protagonist of "Dance"- lessened the degree of anonymity between performer and spectator. The repeated joining of additional, previously anonymous performers- the performer/spectators- throughout the flash mob can be read as a performance of the audience's confrontation with and resolution of the Fantastic. The end result of these alterations to performance methodology is a flash mob performance that occurs at a greater psychical distance than any before it; the spectator's experience of the Fantastic is shortened and is therefore arguably more pleasurable and less confusing. This alteration in reception led to an

increase in virality for the recording of the performance itself, a recording that communicated the three commonalities of flash mob performance through videographic choices that echo the performance methodology on display in “Dance.”

The decrease in anonymity and the increase in pleasurable distance and recognizability for flash mob performance that resulted from the success of “Dance” made them even more appealing for potential sponsoring organizations. Sponsors for flash mob performances post-“Dance” could capitalize on the alignment between spectator and performer that occurred due to the use of performer/spectators and the performed confrontation with and resolution of the Fantastic. This alignment can result in the perception of authenticity for the sponsoring organization and, by association, their products and services. Likewise, sponsoring organizations could use this authentic alignment against the products and services of other companies, creating a confrontation between the aligned spectator and the sponsoring organization’s “inauthentic” competitors. However, a failure to communicate authenticity results in a failed alignment and potential confrontation with the potential consumers the sponsoring organization wishes to gain.

When Bill Wasik created the flash mob he believed that its lifespan would be a matter of months; once he revealed the nature of his social experiment, he believed all the mystique and interest in the form would dry up. His theory was sound; even the most viral of memes does not survive long, and in the early 2000s the tools of virality- fast, widespread, and often portable access to the internet- were still in their infancy. However, the following twelve years have demonstrated that flash mobs have far greater potential than Wasik believed possible. This potential may be due to the adaptable nature of their performance methodology, to their complex, Fantastic reception, or to their ability to align audiences with authentic experiences. In any case, for the meme known as the flash mob- a performance model that has had to survive being

undefinable, legislated, commercialized, and reported dead or dying multiple times by multiple people- twelve years of performance may be just the beginning.

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