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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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