Flash Mobs and Urban Gaming: Networked Performances in Urban Space

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Contents

Abstract

In this thesis I analyze "flash mob" and "urban gaming" practices as manifestations of online social relations in actual spaces. In contrast to theories that emphasize the democratizing and empowering effects of new communication technologies I argue that flash mobs are an example of the depoliticizing effects of online consumption and participation. I explore the highly mediated nature of flash mob performances through an analysis of the visual technologies used to document and represent them online and the social networking sites used to organize them. Through an analysis of flash mob video spectatorship and a Marxist approach to social space, I argue that the participation and activity that is demanded of users in online contexts and seen in flash mob and urban gaming events often functions to defer political action and further incorporate social space into processes of capitalist valorization.

Dans ce projet de mémoire l'auteur se prête à l'étude des "foules éclairs" (flash mobs) et des "jeux urbains" (urban gaming) contemporains en tant que manifestation de relations médiatisées par ordinateur et actualisées dans des espaces actuels. À l'encontre de ceux qui voient chez les foules éclairs l'effet démocratisateur des nouvelles technologies de communication, l'auteur y voit plutôt un effet de dépolitisation de par la même participation et la communication médiatisée. L'analyse des dispositifs sociaux et visuels qui sont utilisés pour les resprésenter ainsi que pour les organiser s'ajoute à l'approche marxiste à l'espace social pour enfin rendre l'hypothèse que ces activités laissent à un temps différé l'action politique et, de plus, rend l'espace social aux effets de valorization capitaliste.

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Introduction: The Participatory Complex

In 2003, urban youth in New York City began to take part in seemingly spontaneous collective actions in which they temporarily appropriated streets, parks, plazas, shopping centres and metro stations and transformed them into performance areas or gaming territories. Strangers, connected by online networks and/or mobile technologies, converged on these spaces to enact irreverent playful behaviours or to engage in street games reminiscent of childhood neighbourhood games of tag or hide-and-seek. These collective performances, which can include adopting a silly walk, dancing, or repeating a random phrase, among dozens of other variations, came to be called "flash mobs" due to the quick flash-like nature of the occurrences and the apparent mob-like conformity of the crowd's actions. The more structured public games, which usually involve a set of rules that determine winners and losers, are now referred to as "urban gaming" or "big games." Flash mobs immediately caught on in cities across the United States and in countries throughout the world, especially in Canada, Europe, Japan and South Korea, places that are densely connected to information networks through cell phones, laptops or home computers. Urban gaming is now represented in an annual week-long festival in New York City, the "Come Out and Play" festival in which game designers are invited to submit games that are selected by a committee to be played by participants.

While flash mobs resemble a number of other cultural and social practices, their forms are somewhat novel and do not readily fit into the pre-existing categories we might use to understand them. On the one hand, these absurd public performances are similar in form to guerrilla theatre and other radical, performance-based artistic interventions. The

participants of flash mobs, however, are not artists and do not frame their actions with any reference to artistic discourses and precedents. Flash mob performances also lack the often politically pointed content or critical juxtapositions found in guerrilla theatre.[1] On the other hand, the collective appropriation of space that occurs when the flash mobbers converge resonates with political protests and activist practices like Reclaim the Streets. With flash mobs, however, no political demands or social critique are clearly articulated. Flash mob participants frequently deny that their actions are politically motivated and instead assert the meaninglessness of the performances. The fact that most participants of flash mobs do not identify with artistic or activist aims leads me to consider them primarily as a popular cultural phenomenon that arises out of everyday experiences with new communication technologies.

Those who have written about flash mobs typically make reference to the technologies used to organize them. Flash mobs are commonly perceived to be a manifestation of online social networks and mobile technologies like cell phones. In most cases, the influence of these technologies is not explored beyond a simple recognition that Internet and cell phone technologies enable people to get together in new ways. Flash mobs, and many other practices in our everyday lives, are much more highly mediated by technologies than these readings imply. Without being technologically deterministic, we should recognize how Internet communications predispose users to particular types of social relations and practices and are not simply neutral tools that have no effect on those who wield them. The use of new technologies is also culturally determined in part by capitalist social relations. In the discussion of flash mobs that follows I explore the relation of these practices to online digital video clips and social networking sites. My

emphasis is not on how these widely accessible tools enable flash mob practices, but how they shape the social, cultural and political imaginary of participants.

While I present flash mobs as highly mediated events, the general thrust of this thesis is to counter dominant assumptions about the inherently democratic and empowering nature of Internet technologies. Flash mobs, I argue, are an example of the depoliticizing effects of online consumption and participation. While "participation" on the part of the general population is commonly perceived to be a fundamental requirement of democratic societies, in the context of the online media environment and the rhetoric of networked interactivity, this concept has become fetishized to the point where it no longer refers to meaningful involvement in a community or political project. I situate flash mobs and urban gaming in a broader cultural complex that I refer to as a "participatory complex." In this cultural complex, participation has acquired a value of its own apart from the nature of the actions that are undertaken.

The manifestations of this complex can be observed in a wide range of contemporary practices. For instance, the rise of participation as a good in itself can be discerned in contemporary art practices such as community art and relational aesthetics.[2] Online participation in the form of blogging, social networking, and video sharing sites, taking part in online polls hosted by news networks or reality television programming, signing online petitions, and joining Facebook groups or message boards are all examples of innocuous participation that may defer rather than encourage political action. While the line between action and participation is relative to the context, we might even include some forms of contemporary activism under a rubric of consensual participation. For example, taking part in sporadic large demonstrations that are ignored by those in power

but remaining otherwise politically inactive in daily life could be taken as another instance of an activity that allows participants to feel satisfied while preventing further politicization.

A paradigmatic example of participation as a value in itself can be found on YouTube with the recent phenomenon of "Start Day." In August 2006, video bloggers were encouraged to post a video thanking individuals in the YouTube blogger community who inspired them to create and post their first video blog – referred to as their "start day." These self-congratulatory videos do not comment on the specific issues that people have addressed in their blogs (which tend to mimic the vacuous topics of lifestyle magazines and television, such as dating and fashion tips, Seinfield-esque observations about trivial human behaviours, opinions about popular culture, and the very highly valued sharing of sentimental personal experiences), but celebrate the affect of individual bloggers who made them feel that "they too could participate." In the videos posted, bloggers create the impression that their start day is like a second birth, the day that they really began to live their mediated YouTube life in a way that confirms their existence [figure 1]. The point is that in order to receive the praise of others (and themselves) nothing more than participation is demanded or required of the bloggers.

Flash mobs are an example of the manifestation of online social networks along with this participatory discourse in actual spaces. The interrelation of online communication networks with bodily movement through urban space provokes a number of research questions relating to the possible transformation of city space, the formation of new kinds of communities or social relations, changes in the modes of spectatorship, and the functioning of the public sphere. While it is a small segment of the population that

chooses to engage in flash mob activities, the very possibility of their emergence is due to broader cultural shifts in viewing practices and stranger relations. Before going into more details about the argument I will pursue in the chapters ahead I will offer some basic descriptions and a brief history of flash mobs and urban gaming.

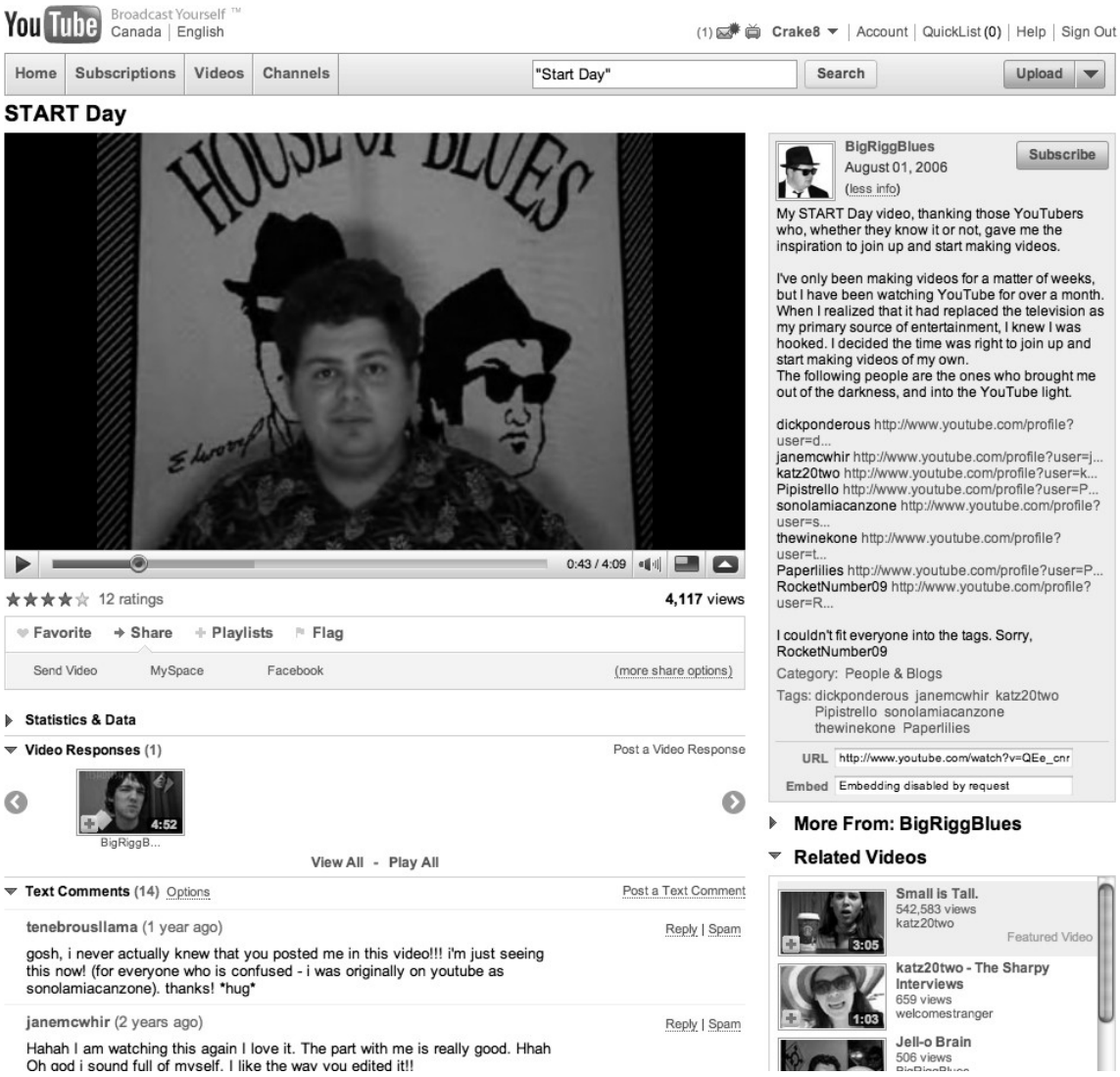

Figure 1

What Are Flash Mobs?

The nature of flash mobs makes it difficult to provide an extensive history. Almost immediately after the first reported flash mobs in 2003, they spread worldwide as people in many different countries created their own versions. This global extension is complemented by a decentralized structure where the "organizers" of an event are usually anonymous and, with a few exceptions, do not form permanent groups dedicated to the production of flash mobs. Nevertheless, evidence of their continued occurrence can be found in video documentation uploaded onto the Internet, Facebook group and event pages, and a few websites. In this section I will limit myself to describing some key developments of flash mob and urban gaming practices.

The first successful flash mob happened in 2003 in a Macy's department store. The self-proclaimed originator of this mob, Bill Wasik, describes how around 200 people crowded into the rug department where they informed the clerks that they were living together in a commune and looking for a "love rug."[3] The participants had been invited to the event through a chain email and, through pieces of paper distributed by the organizers at a rendez-vous location, were given last-minute details about the final location. The flash mobs to follow, some organized by "Bill" in New York City and others by anonymous copycats in other cities, generally followed a classic flash mob model: participants converge at a predetermined spot and at a very specific time, down to the minute, they perform an absurd action in synchrony. The event lasts for only a few minutes with the end time also predetermined beforehand (or occasionally signaled by the sound of a whistle). The participants disperse immediately, and if asked by bystanders about what just happened reply that they're "not sure." An often reported event that fits

this model was the Toys "R" Us flash mob organized by Wasik in August 2003. Around 300 flash mobbers descended on the Toys "R" Us store in Times Square at 7:14, gathered around the animatronic T. Rex in the Jurassic Park section at 7:18, and then dropped to their knees in worship at 7:20. The participants raised their arms in the air, and screamed like terrified worshippers at the dinosaur's feet for exactly four minutes before dispersing.[4]

Whether or not we consider Wasik's love rug event as the first flash mob is open to debate. Some commentators prefer to point to politicized uses of cell phones to gather people quickly and spontaneously as early examples or precedents of flash mobs. A common reference is the role of texting in the "People Power II" uprising in the Philippines in 2001.[5] Examples such as this ignore the ridiculous quality of flash mobs proper and also conflate two different forms of organization. While cell phones are often mentioned as an organizational tool for flash mobs, I have yet to come across a single example where that was the case, even from writers who are attempting to make this connection. The mobility of cell phones enables flexibility and spontaneity so that people can make last-minute plans that can change unpredictably under short notice. The occurrence of a flash mob is spontaneous in appearance only since they are organized over email or social networking sites usually at least a week in advance.

The classic flash mob style quickly became popular throughout Europe, Japan, South Korea, Canada, the U.S. and many other countries. Flash mob gestures have included, for example, lining up like dominoes and falling over, acting like a chicken, engaging in a faux-ninja or pirate battle, dancing, opening an umbrella, breaking into a silly walk,

freezing on the spot, yelling into a cell phone, worshipping monuments, applauding, laughing for minutes on end, and throwing rubber ducks into a fountain.

In 2006 the New York City-based prankster group Improv Everywhere became associated with flash mobs due to some events they planned that involved large groups of people.[6] This group makes a point of differentiating themselves from flash mobs since, as they point out, their website has been up since 2001, two years before the first flash mobs, and they often organize pranks that involve only a few people. One of their events from 2006 was called "No Pants on the Subway," which involved hundreds of people taking the subway in their underwear and acting as if nothing unusual was happening. This has since become an annual event, attracting up to 1200 people in 2009. Another event that got widespread media coverage was their "Freeze in Grand Central Station" for which hundreds of participants froze on the spot for two minutes and then unfroze as if nothing had happened. The videos documenting both of these events were circulating widely on the Internet and as a consequence, "freezes" have become one of the most popular flash mob actions.

In 2006 a Toronto group called Newmindspace began to organize flash mob and urban gaming-like events on a regular basis. Newmindspace represent a significant moment in the development of flash mobs because of their comparative permanence as an organization and because their events deviate in some ways from the original flash mobs.[7] In contrast to the brevity of the early flash mobs, Newmindspace events often last from anywhere between fifteen minutes to two or three hours. This longer duration enables more social interaction amongst participants who are not expected to pretend that they don't know what is going on. While these flash mobs start in a similar fashion with

mobbers acting inconspicuous until the exact start time of the event, the moment of immediate and simultaneous dispersal is no longer important. Some events organized by Newmindspace include: parties on the metro, pillow fights, bubble blowing battles, sidewalk chalk drawing, and large games of capture the flag in city streets. In contrast to typical flash mobs Newmindspace describe their events as having a social purpose that is aimed at "reclaiming public space and building community."[8]

Over time, particular flash mob performances have gained popularity. Freezes, zombie walks, and silent raves are examples of the most commonly mimicked forms. Zombie walks involve some preparation beforehand since participants must dress up as zombies with fake blood drawn on their skin and clothing. The "zombies" form a collective and lurch ominously towards fellow participants playing the role of "victim" as well as bystanders. Performing their best zombie impressions, the flash mobbers moan and mutter "brains!" repeatedly and occasionally descend on a victim like piranhas, pretending to devour their flesh. Silent raves are likely the most popular of all flash mobs. People gather at a metro station or a park and begin to dance to the music coming from their individual mp3 players. The sizes of these mobs started out in the dozens, then grew to hundreds, and eventually thousands in a notable event in New York in 2008.

Urban gaming involves the expansion of video game structures to large-scale city spaces, making use of mobile technologies like cell phones, GPS systems and wireless Internet connections. Unlike flash mobs, spontaneous real-time movements through city spaces are facilitated by mobile technologies. In this sense, urban games can more readily be compared to the tactics of anti-globalization protesters and other politicized crowd formations. Jane McGonigal describes the rise of urban gaming in 2004 with the

"Go Game" in San Francisco and "I Love Bees," which took place in cities across the U.S.[9] Precedents for urban gaming can be found in artists' experiments with new technologies and interactivity in urban space as is seen in the projects of Blast Theory in London, and also LARP's (live-action role-playing) games.[10] Urban gaming has not caught on as quickly or as widely as flash mobs and this is likely due to its reliance on expensive technologies, software for game play and the more complicated planning involved.

The early games described by McGonigal were developed by professional designers and researchers working in universities and game design studios. By 2006 an annual festival representing this new field of game design, called the "Come Out and Play" festival, was launched in New York.[11] The games played during this festival are primarily designed by artists and professional designers and involve the use of mobile technologies, real-time management of the game play by one or more individuals, and in the case of role-playing games, professional actors. There are also examples of urban games that have been organized in less specialized contexts. Since 2006, Newmindspace, for example, have organized games of "capture the flag" in downtown Toronto and New York. While players use their cell phones to stay connected to their team and to share information, not everyone needs to use a cell phone to play and the game play and location of flags is not overseen or managed by remote wireless technology. The players rely on trust that the other team will follow the agreed upon rules that Newmindspace sends in their call-outs for participation. An even simpler form of urban gaming can be found in "Manhunt." In 2006 a Montreal newspaper reported on this phenomenon, which has continued in Canadian cities but without nearly as much press coverage as flash mobs

have received. Manhunt is based on a simple tag-like structure. One person volunteers to be the "hunter" and the other players have two minutes to run away and hide within the designated gaming territory before the hunter begins to stalk them. When the hunter tags a person, they too become a hunter and stalk others until the final player is left victorious. All players wear an orange armband to differentiate them from non-players.

Urban games like Manhunt are not affiliated with institutions or designers and are difficult to find and keep track of apart from the websites of organizers. Unlike flash mobs, these practices are more oriented towards game play and interactivity than absurd spectacle. The comparative lack of documentation or media coverage makes it more difficult to ascertain the level of popularity and frequency of these games. My interest in urban games will be primarily as a foil for flash mob practices. Urban gaming, like flash mobs, represents a manifestation of online networks in urban space and involves performative interactions between strangers.

Literature Review

Those who have sought to describe flash mob practices regularly cite Howard Rheingold's 2003 book, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, as prescient of flash mobs.[12] Rheingold was intrigued by the way that young people in Scandanavia and Japan used texting to keep in touch with their social networks and to flexibly organize gatherings with friends. He argues that new technologies are enabling epidemics of spontaneous cooperation, resulting in what he calls "smart mobs." Smart mobs occur when large groups of people use communication technologies and their collective intelligence to solve problems or organize projects or get-togethers in a decentralized

fashion. As I mentioned earlier, flash mob participants and organizers do not make use of mobile technologies in order to gather. In this sense, flash mobs are inherently different from smart mobs. Also, Rheingold evinces a techno-futurist optimism that places too much faith in new technologies as a means of solving political and social problems.

Like Rheingold, many of those who have described flash mobs wish to emphasize the democratizing or politicizing effects of new technologies. For instance, James Crabtree writes:

> The political implications are clear. Mobile technology is changing the way groups in civil society operate, and new developments such as third- and fourth-generation phones, location-based technologies, mesh networks and other, equally futuristic-sounding technologies will provide more possibilities and give users more power.[13]

The political potential unleashed by mobile technologies is also discussed by Tom Vanderbilt, Jane McGonigal, Judith A. Nicholson and Carl Solander.[14] Other writers are less optimistic about the empowering role of mobile technologies. Rob Walker, for example, describes flash mobbers somewhat disparagingly as part of the "individualism-obsessed techno-futurist set."[15] He mentions the massive blackout that struck the North Eastern United States and parts of Canada in 2003 as an example of the limits of technology and also makes the important observation that "technology alone cannot make a crowd virtuous." Thomas Marchbank argues that flash mobbers are deeply implicated in new technologies to the extent that android-like effects are reflected in conformist and repetitive actions and the opacity of the participants' intentions.[16] Bob Berens expresses skepticism about the lack of overt political content in flash mobs and notes that the expense of new technologies may point to an inherent elitism in terms of accessibility.[17]

The inherent limitations of these arguments, which are premised on the question of whether or not new technologies are politicizing, assume too much and explain too little. They take as self-evident the function of communication technologies and the fact that agents freely determine their uses. For this reason, I have sought to emphasize the specific ways that flash mobbers use technologies. In Chapter One, I focus on the central role of visual recording technologies in flash mob events. Cameras, hand-held digital video cameras, and cell phones capable of recording video are always present during flash mobs but have been scarcely mentioned by those who choose to focus on technologies that aid in organization. By applying different theories of film spectatorship to digital video clips distributed over the Internet I address the question of enjoyment as part of the social process of flash mob spectatorship. The dominant aesthetic of flash mob documentation revolves around the display and manipulation of everyday life, a temporality of the instant, and shock. Drawing on psychoanalytic approaches to subjectivity and theories of modernity, I argue that the shocks of daily life lead to a numbing of experience and a dulling of the capacity for conscious reflection. Flash mobs and flash mob videos allow spectators to gain a contradictory sense of mastery over everyday life. I also situate flash mob spectatorship in the context of the normalization of surveillance and the partial democratization of surveillance that is produced by social networking sites. There is clearly a strong element of exhibitionism in flash mob performances that is related to structures of mutual surveillance and an increasing comfort with online self-representation.

Xavier González associates flash mobs with social movements oriented towards the creation, appropriation or defense of public space. He describes the networks flash

mobbers use as "public" and defines public spaces as marginal, forgotten, and wild territories that escape the control of public bureaucracies and private ownership.[18] John Saunders also argues that flash mob events make claims to or create public spaces.[19] This line of thought is also evident in Solander's writing when he claims that "through the playful and creative employment of communications technologies, the physical space of the city becomes reinvigorated by the social capacity of virtual networks."[20] The city is reinvigorated because the flash mob encourages the "exploration" of locality.[21]

In Chapter Two I reflect on spatial appropriation from the perspective of Marxist theories of social space. I focus on how representations of social relations, as found on the social networking site Facebook, shape interactions in actual space. Rather than reinvest local spaces with social meaning, I argue that flash mob events manifest the partially anonymous and placeless relationships developed online. Locality, and the permanence and history that it implies, remains unimportant to flash mob social relations. Likewise, the stranger relations that are produced by an urban game can be thought of as creating a temporary, mobile neighbourhood that invests the gaming space with a sense of security and playfulness for the duration of the game, but remains unattached to particular places. The particularity of the social relations produced by flash mobs has not been dealt with by commentators in any detail. Crabtree is the only writer to mention, briefly, that flash mobs may be an example of a "new type of association that doesn't involve membership, friendship or kinship."[22] In the second half of Chapter Two I explore this question by comparing silent raves to traditional rave culture. In contrast to subcultures, I argue that flash mob social spaces lack a system of symbolic status or

distinction. They are consequently more open to difference, but also involve less commitment and risk than does subcultural identification.

Leaving aside the use of the technology, some writers search for a political element in flash mobs by opposing the disruptive qualities of the events to the various kinds of order, control and authority. Saunders, for example, argues that flash mobs represent a rupture from socially structured habits and a disruption of the everyday order of things that may make people aware of their ability to act politically.[23] Similarly, Wasik, despite his overall cynicism towards the flash mobs he himself instigated, muses about whether or not they may have been "an anti-authority experiment, a play at revolution, an acting-out of the human choice to thwart order?"[24] Solander mentions the temporal disruption that flash mobs pose for everyday schedules.[25] Mobs and crowds in general can be understood to be inherently dangerous because they have a de-individualizing effect that makes participants prone to conformity and removes feelings of personal responsibility. The political implications of mob-like behaviour are explored by Nicholson, Wasik, Solander, and Vanderbilt.[26] These arguments tend to exaggerate the disruptive effects of flash mobs and are vague in their positing of an "authority" that these practices supposedly contest, especially since, after all, flash mobs entail their own forms of authority.

In Chapter Three I address the question of the political nature of flash mobs through a theoretical elaboration of publicity and a comparison with contemporary activist practices. Flash mobs present themselves as meaningless and irrational, and many commentators find a virtue in this avoidance of explicit political demands.[27] Rather than understand an avoidance of explicit political demands as a radical subversion of meaning,

I argue that flash mobs are an example of a collapse of belief in the critical value of publicity and ultimately a symptom of the "worldless" nature of late-capitalism. The similarities that can be found between flash mobs and groups like Reclaim the Streets reflect less on the political status of flash mobs than on the limits of non-hegemonic political practices as a ground for broad-based political struggle.

Flash mobs are a primary instance of the participatory complex. The fact that people are coming together in new ways may be encouraging to some. However, in a context in which avenues of participation are constantly expanding and web companies like YouTube, Facebook and Google rely on the free labour of participants to valorize their operations, we should be wary about practices that claim they are not demanding anything from us. If we want to politicize our participation in various activities like flash mobs and our use of new technologies, we must recognize the emptiness of participatory discourses and demand more of one another when it comes to defining our collective interests and defending our actions.

Notes

[1]Commentators regularly compare flash mobs to the Situationist International or the Happenings of the Dutch Provos. While there are clear similarities between flash mobs and these art movements since they both entail absurd performances in street space, I find that this association needs to be developed further. I do not have the space to adequately address the complicated relationship between art and politics and where flash mobs might fit. I would point out, however, that for all the absurdity of the SI's and Provo's actions, they nevertheless were situated within an explicit political discourse. In the case of Provo, the happenings organized by Robert Jasper Grootveld were articulated as an anti-consumerist and anti-smoking critique and developed in relation to the anarchist political writing of the Provo leaflets and manifestos. For information about Provo see Richard Kempton, *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2007). The SI developed a Marxist critique of reification in relation to spectacle in consumer society in the writing of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. See: Guy Debord, *The*

Society of the Spectacle (1967), trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005); Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 2001). The cultural production of both the SI and Provo, while having a fanciful and poetic dimension, contained critical juxtapositions or détournements that were aimed destabilizing particular ideological assumptions.

[2] Hal Foster critiques relational aesthetics for the reason that it holds up participation as a value apart from any critical content and even refers to it as the art-world version of flash mobs. See: Hal Foster, "Chat Rooms," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, 190-195 (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2006): 194.

[3] Bill Wasik, "My Crowd: Or, Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2006, 56-66.

[4] This description is based on the first hand account of Bob Berens who participated in the mob. See: Bob Berens, "The Last Page," *Dissent*, Fall 2003, 112.

[5] Judith A. Nicholson, "Flash! Mobs in the Age of Mobile Connectivity," *Fibreculture: Internet Theory, Criticism, Research* 6 (2005): unpaginated.

[6] Improve Everywhere: http://improveverywhere.com/.

[7] Newmindspace: http://www.newmindspace.com/.

[8] Newmindspace, "About Us" web page, http://www.newmindspace.com/about.php.

[9] Jane McGonigal, "SuperGaming: Ubiquitous Play and Performance for Massively Scaled Community," *Modern Drama*, 48:3 (Fall 2005): 471-491.

[10] Blast Theory: http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/.

[11] Come Out and Play: http://www.comeoutandplay.org/.

[12] Howard, Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: the Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003).

[13] James Crabtree, "It's Time to Get Flash," *Newstatesman*, September 15, 2003: 12-13.

[14] Tom Vanderbilt, "On New Model Flash Mobs," *Artforum*, 42:10 (Summer 2004): 71, 74; McGonigal, "SuperGaming"; Nicholson, "Mobile Connectivity"; Carl Solander, "Placing Virtuality: Flash Mobs, Electronic Disturbance, and the War of the Worlds," *Thresholds* 29 (Winter 2005): 11-15.

[15] Rob Walker, "We're All Connected?" *New York Times Magazine*, August 24, 2003, 11-12.

[16] Thomas Marchbank, "Intense Flows: Flashmobbing, Rush Capital, and the Swarming of Space," *Philament* 4 (August 2004): unpaginated.

[17] Berens, "The Last Page," 112.

[18] Xavier González, "Urbanity and Sociability: Scenes and Transformations," *A+T* 27 (Spring 2006): 5-14.

[19] John Saunders, "Flash Mobs," in *Acts of Citizenship*, eds. Engin F. Isen and Greg M. Nielsen, 295-296 (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008).

[20] Solander, "Placing Virtuality," 15.

[21] Solander, "Placing Virtuality," 14.

[22] Crabtree, "It's Time," 11.

[23] Saunders, "Flash Mobs."

[24] Wasik, "My Crowd," 66.

[25] Solander, "Placing Virtuality," 14.

[26] Nicholson, "Mobile Connectivity"; Wasik, "My Crowd," 56; Solander, "Placing Virtuality," 14; Vanderbilt, "New Model Flash Mobs," 71.

[27] See: Vanderbilt, "New Model Flash Mobs," 71; Solander, "Placing Virtuality," 14-15; Wasik, "My Crowd"; González, "Urbanity and Sociability"; Saunders, "Flash Mobs."

Chapter One: Flash Spectatorship

PS where do we find pics?!!??! so many people had cameras…I know im in like a gazillion peoples memory cards!!!!![1]

-HellsYa commenting on the Montreal Metro Party

On March 30, 2007 a Canadian group calling themselves NewMindSpace, who are dedicated to organizing flash mob and urban gaming events, put on a party on the Montreal metro. Hundreds of participants gathered in the last car on the orange line, and began to dance, cheer, laugh, photograph and video record themselves for hours as they rode the metro, picking up fellow partiers at each stop. A sound system had been duct-taped to the ceiling which provided dance music for the people, many of whom wore brightly colored clothing or costumes that clearly referenced rave, goth, punk or hipster subcultures. Coloured streamers were also suspended from the poles and support bars. A warm inclusive atmosphere emanated from the crowd who cheered to welcome the entrance of each new batch of participants and waved through the windows to the commuters waiting on the opposite platforms. The party eventually spread to three metro cars and was shut down by the metro police, though no arrests were made. Aside from the unlikely context, what stood out about this event was the heightened sense of observation displayed by participants through the ubiquitous presence of visual recording technologies. While in recent years digital cameras and camera phones have become a typical part of most social outings, the presence of these technologies along with hand-held digital video cameras and web-cam enabled laptops was a central feature of the event, with more than half of the participants engaged in recording their own activities throughout the duration of the party.

The Montreal Metro party was not unique in its manifestation of self-conscious exhibitionism and spectacle on the part of participants. Almost all flash mobs are recorded, if not by participants, journalists, or bystanders, then by a person designated by the organizers beforehand. The flash mob pillow fight that took place in Vancouver's Robson Square in 2006 is emblematic of this phenomenon. Shortly after the pillow fight began (in typical flash mob style the pillows emerged seemingly out of nowhere at an exact predetermined moment), a ring of bystanders and ostensible insiders with cell-phones, cameras and video equipment formed around the hundreds of pillow-wielding participants. In this case, the number of people with visual recording technologies was nearly equal to the participants themselves (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). The resulting representations of these spectacles circulate online as visual/audio texts and in this form incite viewers to take part in future flash mobs.

Visual technologies and online representations play a fundamental role in producing pleasure, organizing desire, and provoking participation in actual spaces. It is therefore puzzling that the analyses of flash mobs have so far ignored these technologies and representations – those that are used during flash mob events – in favour of what are seen as the organizational tools that enable them; namely, cell-phones and social networking sites. When the spectacular nature of these practices is mentioned, it is only in terms of the spectacle produced for bystanders in actual space, while the spectatorial relations that inhere in flash mob participation – those that involve visual recording technologies in real-time or those that incorporate an online spectator before or after the event – are not addressed. This difference in emphasis is not simply a choice to focus on different technologies but also involves a different view of technology, one in which email lists

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

and cell phones are vaguely conceived as tools that can be used for various ends. This approach minimizes the role of particular technologies in shaping the desires of participants and predisposing them to certain practices and relations. While the uses of technology are not determined in advance (though they are highly overdetermined by capitalist social relations), the agency of users has been overstated in much of the literature concerning not only flash mobs, but online cultures in general. An examination of spectatorship shifts analysis away from actual users in order to more clearly articulate the ideal subject positions that are promoted by the predominant uses of these technologies. This focus on subjectification will enable a more measured assessment of claims regarding agency. In this chapter, I will focus on digital video clips that are embedded online, a typical mode of representation for flash mob activities.

Flash mobs can be understood as exemplary of an emerging "participatory" mode of spectatorship. For some, this phrase may seem like a contradiction in terms since spectatorship often implies a passive viewer. Thinkers who wish to emphasize the agency of the viewer and the different ways that individuals make meaning tend to ignore the structure of spectatorship, and therefore, along with this, whatever sense we could make of the participatory forms of spectatorship that are an essential feature of flash mobs. They presume that individual acts of viewing contest hegemonic power relationships that are reinforced through representations. My reasons for utilizing this term are based on the need to contest the ideology of participation and interaction that is endemic to online analysis and that is often equated with empowerment. In her book on Internet spectatorship, Michele White argues that computer icons, interfaces, graphics and language construct a "user" or spectator who has merged with the screen or

physically entered a space.[2] She points out that the predominant discourses about the online world are couched in terms that imply that we are talking, acting, moving through and entering spatial environments and interacting with real people. Terms that imply the visual contemplation that is the basis for much of our online experience are absent.[3] White claims that "visual and textual representations of Internet activity and empowerment displace the more static processes of Internet looking and reading, the significant ways interactions are scripted, limitations on what can be manipulated, and how some individuals are disempowered."[4] It appears that in this case the very concept of the "empowered user" is the hegemonic construction par excellence as this discourse makes the highly mediated nature of our online experiences invisible. The rhetoric of participation cloaks the passivity, alienation, isolation, and disempowerment of the Internet spectator. The theories of spectatorship that I explore in this chapter will point to the limitations of the concepts of passive and active viewer for thinking about the functioning of discipline in the management of power relationships. I will argue that in a society in which surveillance has become normalized and partially democratized, people become both the objects and subjects of power and that their participation is required in order for the capitalistic accumulation of surplus value to continue to expand.

In another sense, a participatory mode of spectatorship designates an actual physical activity provoked by online experiences or enabled by mobile technologies. In one of her chapters, White focuses on the static, folded nature of the body in relation to the home computer screen and the many hours often spent by spectators in a fairly immobile state.[5] While I would like to maintain White's focus on the scripted ways of looking and her emphasis on visual experience in online settings, the concept of spectatorship must

include the expanded actions of the body in space. I will argue that the practices of flash mobs and urban gaming are shaped by Internet spectatorship that operates in relation to embedded video clips. My analysis of what is both a spectatorial and a spatial practice that involves the movement of bodies in space will be further developed in chapter two where I will rely on the conception of the production of space developed by Henri Lefebvre.[6]

Spectatorship and the Cinematic Apparatus

There are three primary spectatorial relationships that constitute flash mobs. So far only one has been privileged, which is the direct spectacle that is created between participants in actual space and the bystanders present who behold the event. The second is the more highly mediated relation to spectacle that exists as the event is being captured on mobile video recording devices on the part of organizers, bystanders, journalists, and participants. The third, which I will analyze in this chapter, is the relation between the video segments representing the flash mob online and the presumed spectators who may or may not have been participants in the flash mob. Before analyzing online flash mob video in detail I will briefly elaborate the meaning of spectatorship as it has been developed in relation to film.

Spectatorship is a concept that has been very productive in film studies for thinking about the ideological effects of cinema. In a very well-known essay titled "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Jean-Louis Baudry argues that the technical apparatus of film reproduces the dominant ideology of the transcendent subject through a process that is analogous to the mirror stage described by Jacques Lacan.[7]

Baudry describes how the technique of linear perspective developed during the Renaissance initiated an illusion of space as a continuous whole and privileged a fixed point of view that positioned the subject at the centre of this unified field of vision.[8] He claims that this ideological effect is likewise the basis of the camera obscura. This model of the unified field of vision, he argues, is temporarily disrupted by the multiple images captured by the movie camera. The moving image is made up of a series of different images recorded onto a film strip. Once these images are inserted into the projector the differences must be negated in order for the continuity of movement to function. Baudry understands this technical process to be a repression of differences. He writes:

> One may presume that what was already at work as the originating basis of the perspective image, namely the eye, the "subject," is put forth, liberated…by the operation which transforms successive, discrete images…into continuity, movement, meaning. With continuity restored, both meaning and consciousness are restored.[9]

The projected film image produces an experience of an eye or subject that through identification with the camera has become liberated from the constraints of the body, and imagines itself in an idealized position of mastery over the world depicted in images. Baudry then goes on to draw associations between the viewing conditions in cinema and the process of subject constitution that occurs in the mirror stage theorized by Lacan. The mirror stage refers to the hypothetical moment when a baby first identifies with its mirror image. At this point the child experiences a split between its lack of control over its own body and its ability to organize the visual field. The mirror image is experienced by the child through fantasy as a more complete or ideal version of itself because it can be conceptualized as a unified being. Baudry points to the similar immobility experienced by the film spectator who finds themselves "chained, captured, or

captivated" in their seat in the darkened theatre where "there is no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside."[10] The screen functions as a mirror that reflects images of the world. He argues that two levels of identification function in the cinema, the first being identification with the characters represented in the film, based on narrative continuity, and the second being identification with the gaze of the camera, which depends on the illusion of the moving image and the repression of differences on the level of the technical apparatus. This repression of difference is analogous to the fantasy of a complete subject that disguises the trauma of the split subject constituted in lack.

Feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey have worked with psychoanalysis and spectatorship to critique the inscription of a gendered gaze that presupposes a male spectator. Mulvey focuses on the gaze at the level of narrative content to elaborate how visual pleasure is constructed according to gendered norms in Classical Hollywood cinema.[11] While her critique is still based on idealized subject positions constituted by the cinema, it opened the door for a number of critiques of the concept of spectatorship for ignoring differences among concrete individual viewers and the variable meanings that can be ascribed to a single film text through counter-hegemonic readings, fluctuating identifications, and the visual pleasure thereby attained.[12]

The concept of the spectator (and transcendent subject) constituted by the cinematic apparatus is founded on fairly stable viewing conditions. Not only the technical nature of film projection, but also the context of the darkened theatre with its conventions of audience silence and immobility provide the background for the generalized condition of cinema viewing that serves as the basis of Baudry's argument. In turning towards an

analysis of digital video clips embedded online, both the technical nature of the images and their viewing contexts must be reexamined.

While I do not intend to pursue an argument for the ideological nature of digital video at the level of the technical apparatus, as Baudry does for cinema, I will simply point out that the discreet images that form the basis of the film strip no longer exist in digital video. Video delivers an image that is constantly in flux at the level of individual pixels but does not involve a jump between multiple images that are static and complete when viewed separately. An argument for the negation of difference may be found at other moments in the technical processes of digital video, but this is not a direction that interests me in relation to flash mob spectatorship. Regardless of the technical basis of the moving image, at the moment when it is consumed, an illusion of movement is created.

The multiple viewing contexts of online videos make it difficult to speak of an Internet video apparatus the way that theorists were able to discuss a cinematic apparatus. Online videos are viewed at all times of the day in workplaces, at school, in coffee houses and restaurants, in the private home and in some public streets and squares where free access to wireless Internet connections is a growing reality. The devices on which videos are viewed range from home computers and laptops, to a variety of mobile devices with Internet and video playback capability. The online contexts for a single video are also highly variable. They can be viewed through video-sharing sites, the most popular of which are YouTube and Vimeo, where the viewer can construct a personalized playlist or repeat the video as often as they like. Videos are embedded on particular websites, posted through individual profile pages, group pages, or event pages in social networking

sites like MySpace or Facebook, or shared through email links between friends. We might say that the context in which online videos are consumed is the polar opposite of the darkened theatre where Baudry argues there is "no exchange, no circulation, no communication" with the world outside.

The viewing context for online video is more pervasive than immersive, and it is in its ubiquitous nature that we find its power to insinuate itself into the structures of viewing in daily life. The typically short running time and lack of narrative structure in flash mob videos in particular also leads towards a different account of visual pleasure than that found in the Classical narrative cinema. In the following section I will describe a theory of spectatorial pleasure that is based on the early non-narrative cinema and that provides a basis for thinking about online video spectatorship.

The Cinema of Attractions

In his article, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," Tom Gunning argues that spectatorial pleasure in early cinema derived from the thrill of visual shocks in the face of the power of the moving image and the unsettling effects of capitalist modernity.[13] Rather than reinforce the myth of the early film audience as naively believing in the reality of the image in front of them, Gunning demonstrates how the shock experienced was due to a recognition of and amazement at the illusionary effects of the apparatus. He historicizes his mythic audience by situating their spectatorship within the context of the popularity of magic theatre in the years preceding the emergence of film. The pleasure derived from the magic theatre is based in a dialectic of reality and illusion that depends on a rationalistic context and the decline of

belief in actual magic. Gunning argues: "the magic theatre laboured to make visual that which it was impossible to believe. Its visual power consisted of a trompe l'oeil play of give-and-take, an obsessive desire to test the limits of an intellectual disavowal—I know, but yet I see."[14] Likewise, the early film audience experienced visual pleasure through a knowledge that they were witnessing an illusion and the resulting thrill from the disorientation of the senses. "Far from credulity," Gunning argues "it is the incredible nature of the illusion itself that renders the viewer speechless. What is displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than the force of the cinematic apparatus."[15]

An important consequence of Gunning's argument is that it disables the recuperation by classic film scholars of the mythically naïve early film audience that is used to reinforce a theory of the passivity of the spectator. He is critiquing film theorists who "envision audiences submitting passively to an all-dominating apparatus, hypnotized and transfixed by its illusionist power."[16] Gunning's criticism is not based on differential readings of film texts by audience members situated according to categories of gender, race or class, as were those of the scholars critiquing Baudry and Mulvey. The spectator he describes is generalized in relation to a specific cinematic aesthetic that he terms the "cinema of attractions." This is an aesthetic that dominated the early period of film in which a number of conventions had the effect of foregrounding the spectator rather than providing a voyeuristic experience of mastery over the image, as in classic narrative cinema. The spectator that is envisioned in Gunning's analysis is one who can experience visual pleasure delivered by the apparatus while maintaining an awareness of the illusory nature of the images and thus not falling prey to the ideology based on

repression of difference theorized by Baudry. This point is emphasized by the fact that early moving images were often presented as still projections that would then begin to move as the projector was cranked, irrefutably displaying the illusionistic nature of the moving image.

The cinema of attractions bears a number of striking resemblances to the conventions of many contemporary online videos and is therefore worth describing in detail. The early cinema was made up of short segments that Gunning argues were based in a structure of display and exhibitionism rather than narrative arc. The running time for these films was very short, ranging from less than one minute to a few minutes in length and so a number of them would be screened in sequence, often as part of a variety show that could include live music, dancing and comedy. This cinema was oriented towards an interest in realism and anti-aesthetic, with the most common scenes being "actualities" – simple displays of street scenes or moments of everyday life – or "curiosities," which were often grotesque, as in the close up shots of bugs, the contorted face of a criminal, or the electrocution of an elephant. These films directly addressed the viewer through the aid of a showman present in the theatre who would describe the image about to be seen, playing up feelings of expectation and anticipation. Rather than the gradual development of a situation, the temporality of early cinema was based on the instant, or a movement between presence and absence. Gunning describes this temporality using the terms of magic theatre as "now you see it, now you don't."[17] Often characters in the films would nod or gesture towards the camera, making it clear that what is being shown is intended to be seen by the spectator and is being presented for their viewing pleasure.

Contemporary online video comprises every genre imaginable, including films based on a narrative that are presented in their entirety or broken up into smaller segments depending on the format of the website. Along with content derived from older media forms and reformatted for online viewing, reality genres have emerged that are particular to the online video environment. These include video blogging, webcam surveillance, and documentation by users of unscripted scenes from everyday life. Like the cinema of attractions, these genres are structured around exhibitionism and display rather than narrative content. They also share an interest in portraying scenes from everyday life and the actions or thoughts of ordinary people. It is within this latter group that flash mob representation can be categorized.

The typical flash mob video bears the signifying marks of user-generated content. These include the shaky hand-held camera aesthetic, low production values, natural lighting, pixilation resulting from consumer-quality video equipment or cell-phone recording, very basic pre-set video effects and editing, or no editing at all, and a predisposition to overlaying the creator's favorite song to the footage.

A video uploaded onto YouTube on December 10th, 2008 by the user cackalacky789 demonstrates all of these characteristics.[18] The video is titled "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave" and represents the convergence of undergraduate students in the library lobby of their university who danced for eight minutes and sang a school chant before dispersing. The video begins with a few shots of the empty library and an intertitle that reads: "On December 9, 2008 in order to break up the stresses of exam week, hundreds of UNC students descended on the Undergraduate Library in a flashmob rave." Meanwhile, a dance track is heard slowly increasing in volume. In the next scene the camera is

Figure 1.3

Figure 1.4

angled downwards onto an empty lobby below from the railing of a rectangular balcony that surrounds a cut-away in the floor (Figure 1.3). The time of 11:00 pm is overlaid in blue text. At the moment when the main rhythm and beat begins and the soundtrack reaches full volume the video cuts to the same view of the lobby that is now filled with hundreds of students bouncing up and down (Figure 1.4). The students can be heard cheering loudly over the added dance track as a few of them body surf over the crowd. At this point the camera zooms in on the image of a middle-aged black woman with her hands on her hips watching the students with a look of consternation on her face. She wears a laminated tag on a string around her neck and we can assume she is a member of the library staff. The camera zooms out and shifts to slow motion as the beat of the dance track and the noises of the students temporarily cut out leaving only the sound of the synthesizers. The image cuts to a shot of students dancing on the counter that separates the library staff from the lobby and the mass of dancing students. This is followed by another zoomed-in shot of an older white security guard behind the counter who turns and walks away after asking a girl to get down off of the countertop. The camera then pans across the balcony from which it is shooting. We see dozens of students crowding around the railings, looking down on the students below. Flashes from cameras and cell-phones emanate from this crowd of bystanders as they record the spectacle. We return to the students below who are now tossing around a garbage bin. The main refrain of the dance track resumes as we return to normal speed and the students form a dance circle in the centre of the group. A final intertitle reads: "Can't end it without a little school spirit…" as the dance track is silenced. We are given a final shot of the students breaking

into a school chant and song. The video ends after a running time of four and a half minutes.

The introductory shots of the empty library, the opening intertitle, and the slowly building dance track have a similar function as that of the showman or announcer from the cinema of attractions who would direct the audience's attention to a particular spectacle that they are about to see, building up their anticipation. We watch the scene with the expectation that something will intervene in this quiet space. When the camera angles itself downwards to present the empty lobby below, we wait for a crowd of people to quickly converge on the space. Moments of convergence and dispersion tend to be a central focus of most flash mob videos, in particular, those that are aiming to capture events that are of short duration and not based largely on participant interaction. In the case of the "Chapel Hill" video, the temporality of presence/absence that is key to the cinema of attractions is emphasized even more strongly by the video editor's choice to cut directly to a shot where the people have already assembled rather than filming the moment of convergence. With this cut we experience the flash-like nature of the event in the exaggerated terms of a magic trick where a mass of hundreds of people materialize instantaneously onto the screen out of thin air. The presentation of a particular event that is clearly signaled to the viewer beforehand aligns this video with a type of spectatorship that is structured on display and exhibitionism, where what is seen by the viewer is meant to be seen and therefore tends towards foregrounding the presence of the viewer rather than presenting a scene that leaves the spectator invisible in the act of looking.

The panning scene that shows us students taking video and photographic images of the event reinforces the “to-be-seen-ness” of the flash mob and presents us with figures to

identify with as spectators. Witnesses or uninitiated bystanders are another common focus of flash mob videos. Their presence stands in for the gaze for whom the students imagine themselves performing. Particular shots encourage the spectator to identify with the position of the dancing students, such as when the library staff and security guard are shown in an external and powerless position next to the spontaneous mass. Of course, nothing guarantees that we don't in fact identify with these characters and the position of (likely unwanted) authority that is projected onto them by the actions of the student's and the video representation.

Part of the pleasure obtained from this video may be due to the visual shock afforded the viewer by the unpredictable temporality of display. The short running time of the videos, the structure of presence/absence that is apparent in the display of the flash mob event, and the scattered viewing context from which they are seen liken flash mob spectatorship to the series of visual shocks that Gunning associates with early cinema. In describing the temporality of these short films, Gunning writes:

> the sudden flash (or equally sudden curtailing) of an erotic spectacle, the burst into motion of a terroristic locomotive, or the rhythm of appearance, transformation, and sudden disappearance that rules a magic film all invoke a spectator whose delight comes from the unpredictability of the instant, a succession of excitements and frustrations whose order cannot be predicted by narrative logic and whose pleasures are never sure of being prolonged.[19]

This lack of narrative arc resulting in pleasure from unpredictable displays could describe many of the short online videos based in reality genres and many fictional genres as well. While Gunning is arguing for an "active" form of spectatorship where the presence of the spectator is acknowledged, we must be careful to not assume that active necessarily implies empowered. In the concluding paragraphs of his essay on temporality, he in fact describes the early film viewer as a victim of hysteria as he likens

this viewing experience to surprise, shock, trauma, and the sudden rupture of stability.[20] The desire for this type of destabilizing thrill is linked to the loss of coherence and immediacy of daily life in the face of mass consumer culture, the commodification of experience and the rise of urban alienation in the nineteenth century.

Working with Benjamin's idea that shock is the dominant sensory experience of modernity, Susan Buck-Morss provides a nuanced account of the numbing of experience in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of the frenetic pace of life in the modern metropolis, as well as the stress and danger of modern factory work and warfare.[21] She describes how the individual protects itself from excessive stimulation by allowing sensations to pass over it without engaging experience or memory in conscious perception, and in so doing prevents trauma from occurring.[22] This results in a disintegration of the capacity for experience or a numbing of the senses. "The eyes still see," Buck-Morss writes, "bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much – and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as *an*aesthetics."[23] She describes the discovery of narcotics and anaesthetics in medicine as aids in the numbing of experience that had a profound impact on the perception of the body. Experience of the body becomes split between agent, object and observer. The counterpart to anaesthetics on the level of the social body is the phantasmagoria of the mass media and the modern city. Phantasmagoria, she tells us, was the name given to an exhibition of optical illusions produced by magic lanterns in 1802. The simulated sensory experiences resulting from new technologies had the effect of altering consciousness through a flooding of the senses. Unlike narcotics, phantasmagoria are experienced collectively and so take on the

status of objective fact. "Whereas drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception," Buck-Morss argues, "the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control."[24]

The main argument that she builds is that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which is associated by Benjamin with fascism. The ability of people to take pleasure in their own manipulation and destruction derives from a split in the subject between agent, object and observer. The introduction of anaesthetizing effects on the individual allows the subject to observe their own body, and the larger social body, as an object of manipulation that does not feel pain. This also allows the subject to occupy the position of observer without responding empathetically to cries of pain since the body as object is numbed. Buck-Morss relates these changes in perception to fascism:

> it was the genius of fascist propaganda to give to the masses a double role, to be observer as well as the inert mass being formed and shaped. And yet, due to a displacement of the place of pain, due to a consequent mis(re)cognition, the mass-as-audience remains somehow undisturbed by the spectacle of its own manipulation.[25]

She is careful to note that sensory alienation outlives fascism and therefore continues to enable its reemergence.

The spectator, whose pleasure derives from visual shocks, is therefore a subject whose capacity for conscious reflection and experience has become numbed. If this numbing effect produces a subject that is alienated from his or her own body, we cannot conceptualize the spectator as occupying a singularly active or passive position. Ambiguity arises since the spectator is asked to actively engage or assent to its own

manipulation and in return gains pleasure through observing the spectacle of its own destruction. In Buck-Morss' analysis we return again to Lacan's mirror stage where the observing subject obtains scopic pleasure through a narcissistic identification with an image of a complete subject, or in this case the representation of a social totality through the organization of the pure fascist state, based on a disavowal of the fragmented body.[26] Despite his description of the spectator of visual shocks as "hysterical" Gunning still maintains a hope that the shock in the face of the cinema of attractions also functioned as a "shock of recognition" that "far from fulfilling a dream of total replication of reality – the *apophantis* of the myth of total cinema – the experience of the first projections exposes the hollow centre of the cinematic illusion."[27]

Perhaps the term "shock" seems too strong to describe the contemporary reaction to flash mob videos. The primary source of scopic pleasure described by Gunning derives not only from a temporal structure, but also from a thrill or shock produced by an awareness of the illusion of the moving image. Needless to say, in the present moment the illusion of movement has become so ubiquitous in our daily lives that it is a taken for granted aspect of our consumption of images. A better example of phantasmagoric sensory experience may be found in the illusionistic drive of CGI special effects in films and animated movies, in which, it could be argued, visual pleasure derives more from immersive technical displays than from narrative arc. In the following section I will locate the contemporary fascination with representations of everyday life not with realism at the level of the moving image, but with an illusion of access to the real produced through naturalized and democratized structures of surveillance.

Access to the Everyday in Surveillance Society

In the shift to digital images the indexical quality associated with photography is lost. The digital does not connote the capturing of a specific moment in time. The sense of realism associated with digital documentation arises rather from its prevalence. Rather than an indexical relation to a particular instant, the proliferation of online video presents us with a seemingly all-encompassing representation, the apex of which is the 24 hour webcam that appears to create a doubling of every moment in daily life, whether important or insignificant. The underlying logic of this proliferation is that if absolutely everything is turned into a representation, then nothing is left hidden and our access to the truth is assured. The very pervasiveness of digital recording is what confirms its access to the truth of who we are or the real of the everyday. The ubiquity of digital recording technologies results in a normalization of relations of surveillance. The widespread surveillance that I'm referring to is not only the centralized structure of CCTV cameras, explained through reference to Bentham's panopticon, but the mutual surveillance that has become normalized through "reality" entertainment and online self-representation on blogs and social networking sites.

In his book, *Reality TV: the Work of Being Watched*, Mark Andrejevic links the loss of indexicality following digitalization with the compensatory desire for "reality" formats that promise an authenticity lacking in traditional television fiction.[28] This lure of authenticity is based on the promise of greater participation in the production of culture on the part of viewers, a promise that masks and compensates for growing economic inequality, and an uneven access to information. Like Gunning and Buck-Morss, Andrejevic explains this desire for authenticity with a loss of meaningful experience in

modernity. He writes: "the thinning of experience – the loss of substance – connotes the loss associated with modernity and eventually comes to stand for the loss associated with homogenized, mass-produced culture." Further, "the revitalization of the visual medium promised by reality TV requires the rehabilitation of indexicality and, with it, the dense substantiality of the real."[29] In order to access the real of daily life every mundane moment must be captured on video. One response to this extensive commercial surveillance is the webcam site where users choose to exhibit the routine moments of their lives on webcams installed throughout their homes. Andrejevic is interested in exploring the reasons that viewers now seem willing to voluntarily submit to surveillance while in the past surveillance was seen as an oppressive function of the state or was related to the restrictions of the workplace. His findings include a belief that surveillance is a type of consumer control, that the mass-customization that results from data surveillance is a form of convenience, that submission to surveillance is equated with self-expression, self-knowledge, and self-validation, and that comprehensive surveillance promises access to the real.[30]

As a reality genre, flash mob videos share some of the qualities of surveillance associated with webcam sites and reality television. They bear the authenticity of user-generated content and control over production, an access to the real of everyday life, and signify self-expression and self-validation on the part of participants. Yet, while these videos produce a thrill from a feeling of access to the real they deviate from most other reality genres. Part of the pleasure that comes from watching flash mob videos derives from the fact that a flash mob alters or manipulates the rhythms of everyday life. Rather than a representation of the mundane exchanges and the repetitive actions found in most

reality genres, the flash mob focuses on the creation of a spectacle or an event out of everyday reality. A contradiction is introduced in the logic of accessing a "real" that is also scripted on the part of the flash mob organizers. The opening shots of most flash mob videos display a commonplace scene of people moving through a public space, similar to the actualities that were popular in the cinema of attractions. These establishing sequences confirm the everyday quality of the site and the crowd. They act as the markers of authenticity against which a flash transformation can be registered.

A video posted onto YouTube by the user nanioushka and called "Our very own FLASH MOB/FREEZE!" accentuates this manipulation of routine moments with the use of intertitles.[31] In this three-minute video, dozens of students freeze for several minutes in a school cafeteria. The opening shots alternate between two different views of a busy cafeteria full of students (Figure 1.5). The footage is slightly sped up, which gives an impression of time passing. Students shuffle through the cafeteria, eat, and talk in a repetitive flow that is interrupted by the first intertitle which reads: "a normal day where 60 of us along with our teacher had a bright idea of doing FREEZE in our own cafeteria…" This is followed by: "of COURSE…I HAD to bring my cameras," and "let's watch the result…" A shot of the cafeteria returns in normal speed that shows a mix of now motionless students with others who are still moving. After only five seconds, another intertitle is introduced: "here's a closer look…some had NO idea what was happening!" We are then presented with a series of closer shots as the cameras weave through the crowd of frozen people. An emphasis is placed on the faces of those who do not know what is going on and respond by laughing, smiling, or looking around with a confused or surprised expression. The routine actions that are displayed by the

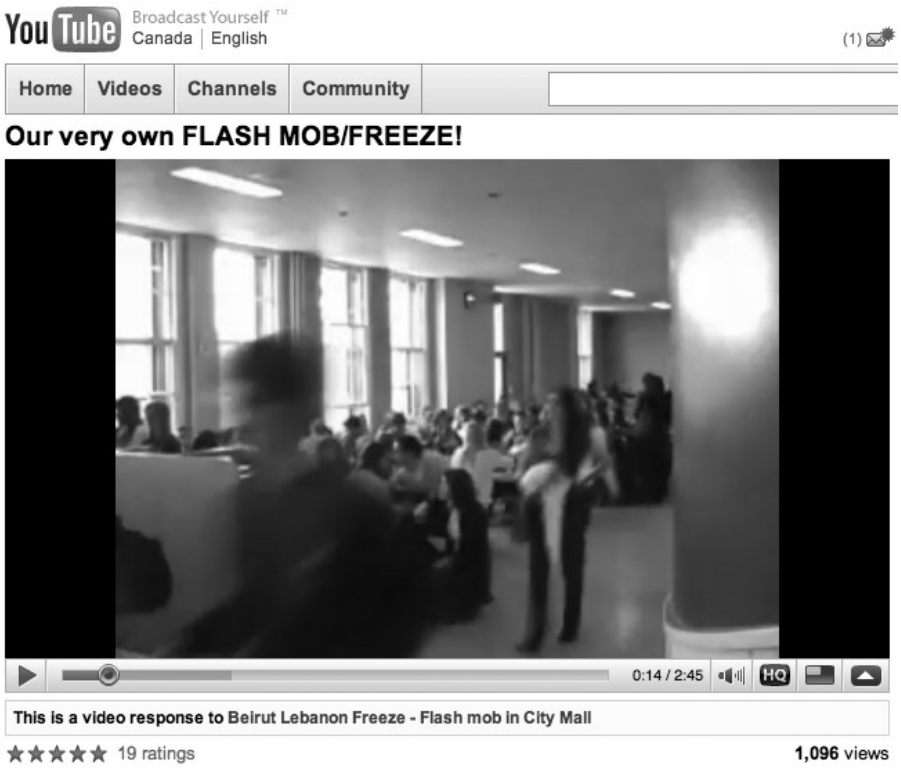

Figure 1.5

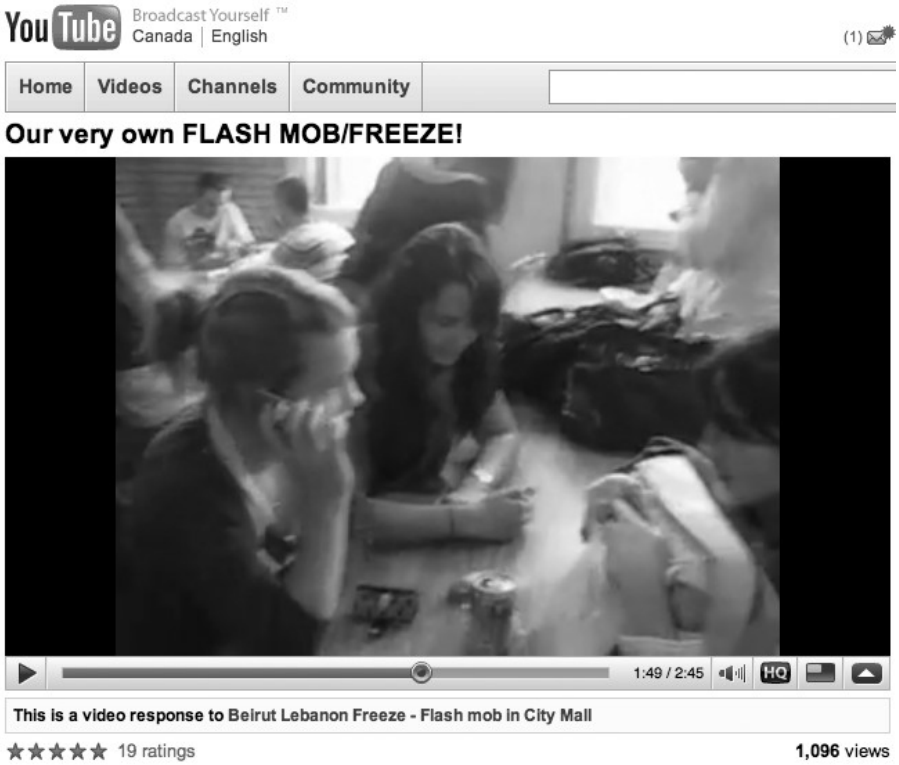

Figure 1.6

motionless students include bending down to pick up some dropped notebooks, holding trays of food, eating, drinking, laughing and talking with friends, and talking into a cell-phone (Figure 1.6). A final intertitle tells us: "and then we all left like nothing happened!" This is followed by a shot that shows the frozen crowd returning to life.

Flash mob freezes like this one spectacularize everyday life by disrupting the typical temporality of routine actions. The thrill of viewing such a display is partly based on recognition that the event and representation were produced by "everyday" people, meaning that it was not scripted by a production company or used to make profit. Beyond these traits that it shares with other user-documented displays of the everyday, such as video blogs, there is also a pleasure that comes from the idea that the routine of daily life is being shaped and manipulated by the flash mobbers. An illusion of mastery is created that the spectator can access through an easy identification with participants who are not distanced by celebrity status or the high production values of studio-produced entertainment. It is this participatory aspect of flash mobs that is their hallmark. However, the excluded bystander acts as a necessary supplement.

Images of surprised bystanders are a common feature of flash mob videos. These images substitute for the feelings of the video spectator who may or may not be shocked by actions that destabilize belief in the unscripted nature of everyday life. This process of substitution allows the spectator to identify with the participants and their apparent control over the spectacle produced. Identification with the manipulation of the rhythms of daily life and the possible reproduction of the shock-value of the event conforms to the anaesthetized sensory experience described by Buck-Morss. The subject split between object, observer, and if also a participant, agent, aestheticizes everyday life. Some

writers who have commented on flash mobs express hope that the appropriation of space and the manipulation of daily life will translate into politicizing action.[32] This is similar to how Gunning hopes that a shock of "recognition" occurs in the cinema of attractions, as opposed to the classic film theory of the spectator who is unaware of themselves in the act of viewing. I will address the question of the political nature of flash mobs in detail in chapter three. At this moment I will simply assert that an awareness of the alterable nature of daily rhythms and spatial practices does not automatically manifest itself in progressive or radical actions and can in fact serve as an outlet for regressive expressions of self-entitlement. For example, it is striking that in the "Chapel Hill" video, students spontaneously chose to code their transgressive spatial practice as an affirmation of school spirit and an identification with the brand of the university by singing the school sports chant.

The Crowd as Spectacle in the Exhibitionary Complex

The sense of mastery enjoyed by a spectator of reality video genres is not based simply in a passive mode of voyeurism but in an exhibitionistic structure of surveillance. Seeing implies being seen. User-generated images of everyday spaces function as a reminder to the viewer that it could easily be them represented in a video captured on the ubiquitous recording devices that are now a commonplace part of the spaces of work, school and leisure. Every time we see others in a small pixilated image in generally accessible spaces we acknowledge that we are likewise seen and recorded in similar contexts. The normalization of "democratized" surveillance therefore involves a desire to see the lives of others and also the need and desire to exhibit our own lives and seek validation

through being seen. This exhibitionary relationship entails the disciplining of bodies and the production of particular kinds of subjects.

Working with Michel Foucault's writings on structures of surveillance in disciplinary societies, Tony Bennett argues that a number of institutions emerged in the nineteenth century that produced a democratized structure of surveillance and self-discipline that he calls the "exhibitionary complex."[33] While Foucault focuses on institutions of confinement in his analysis of prisons, schools, and asylums, Bennett argues that alongside this "carceral archipelago" arose a complex of institutions predicated on display such as museums, exhibitions, fairs, arcades, department stores, dioramas, and panoramas. At the same moment that punishment moved from the public scaffold into the hidden space of the prison, art objects and cultural artifacts moved from the private collections of royalty and aristocrats into public museums. In Bennett's formulation, these institutions organized and disciplined crowds by allowing everyone to be both the object and subject of power. Rather than mapping the social body to make it visible to those in power, Bennett argues that:

> through the provision of object lessons in power – the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display – they sought to allow the people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.[34]

In contrast to the architectural metaphor of the panopticon, where every individual is made to feel that they are the object of a centralized gaze and therefore internalize it, the exhibitionary complex produces a disciplined crowd by allowing people to see themselves from the side of power. The Eiffel tower serves as Bennett's architectural metaphor because it is both an object to behold and a viewing platform from which one turns the city itself and the crowds below into a spectacular object.

Along with this tendency for society to be rendered as a spectacle, Bennett points to the increasing involvement of the state in producing and organizing these spectacles, particularly with the rise of national and international exhibitions.[35] Progress became the predominant theme of nineteenth century exhibitions with the nation cast as both its representative and product. National museums organized objects in new ways to represent a linear history of progress that culminated in the highest point of civilization, exemplified by whichever European nation happened to host the institution. The museum and the exhibition therefore offered their European public a privileged position in history while foreigners were objectified and represented as barbaric or primitive. A liberal subject was constituted in the process who identified with power and performed a role appropriate to the idealized vision produced by the state: the crowd as an ordered totality. Bennett points to the role of enjoyment in creating order and managing power relations. In the case of the exhibitionary complex the subject is imbricated in a structure of scopic and exhibitionistic pleasure.

The democratization of the gaze described by Bennett is appropriate for thinking about the socialized surveillance that is encouraged through social networking sites and the representations of the manipulated crowd found in flash mob videos. Online video representations function as the viewing platform that allows the crowd to be envisioned as a spectacular object. However, the scopic and exhibitionistic enjoyment that produced a self-disciplining subject and citizen of the nation-state in the nineteenth century is today caught up in a different set of institutional demands. While museums and exhibitions continue to exist, their role is no longer a defining one. The display of information and images and the transmission of sound have come to replace the presentation of objects.[36]

This shift is due to the rise of the mass media in the twentieth century. Radio, television, and film continued the formation of nationalistic sentiment for much of the century. Since the rise of neoliberalism in the eighties, however, the role of the state in the production and regulation of national culture has shifted towards an emphasis on creating competitiveness in the world market.[37] The interest in organizing knowledge and culture through academic disciplines has been overtaken by the administration of information, leisure and consumption through market-based institutions, predominantly the entertainment industries and tourism. All of this points to the production of a different subject of power and discipline.

In the contemporary context subjects are called upon to produce themselves through the labour of consumption. In the decentralized structures of communication facilitated by the Internet, the work of identity formation requires not only the purchasing of commodities but also the production of content. Websites based on user-generated content, referred to as web 2.0, depend on participation and interactivity to be effective. In "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0," Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus argue that social networking sites like MySpace are a part of the society of control where discipline is diffused throughout the population rather than emanating from centralized institutions.[38] Biopower is the term used to describe the dynamic and flexible power relations through which populations self-manage and multiply their productive capabilities according to the needs of capital. According to Coté and Pybus, the immaterial affective labour that people engage in online is expanding the reach of capital into areas of life previously outside of the process of rationalization and the production of surplus value. One primary source of surplus value is the wealth of information on demographic taste

cultures that is produced online by users and then sold by the website to marketing agencies.[39] They also argue that online social networking sites train youth to become accustomed to a type of entrepreneurial labour that they describe as "online personal brand management."[40] The power to arrange and command objects for public display that Bennett described as a lesson in power administered by nationalistic institutions is now manifested in the power of individuals to command images and texts in the construction of online self-representations.

Within an online context that functions as a production platform for networked subjectivities oriented towards increasing their own publicity and valorization, where does the flash mob crowd figure? Unlike the highly individualized profile pages of social networking sites where spectators organize images and texts that represent themselves, flash mob videos tend to represent a deindividualized crowd. Particular individuals are difficult to identify due to the poor video quality and the typically distant shots that attempt to capture a sense of the mass assembling, performing, and then disassembling. Occasionally, participants post comments on video pages in which they identify themselves appearing at moments in the video, and like any image, a flash mob video may be posted to a page in order to express the tastes, interests, or lifestyle of the user. The particular spectatorial relationship encouraged by the flash mob however, is one in which the viewer seeks pleasure in sublimation rather than differentiation. The representation of the crowd substantiates the imagined "community" of Internet spectators and reassures the user that the relatively isolated interactions that they experience online are part of a social process. The videos also provide a framework for

the spectator's participation in actual space. In chapter two I will address the nature of the "community" produced in flash mob events.

The viewing relationship implied in Gunning's cinema of attractions where the spectator is foregrounded in the act of looking stops short of the present demands for participation placed on the Internet spectator. Like other web 2.0 communities, flash mobs are dependent on the participation of Internet spectators for their effectiveness. This participation requires not only an awareness of their presence as spectator in the face of visual shocks but an engagement of the spectator not only online but also in social space.

The Participatory Complex in Social Space

Flash mobs are one example among many of the ways that Internet spectators are required to participate in productive or performative actions in actual space in order to participate online. The most minimal interactions demanded by online interfaces are the click and search actions performed by spectators whose bodies are seated in the folded position described by White in a close face-to-face relation between the viewer and the screen. Increased labour is performed when the viewer chooses to "comment" on the content they consume, engage in online forums and games, or when they upload content of their own. The body becomes more involved in participation when viewers produce content meant to be shared in online contexts. This includes taking photographs or recording videos with the preconceived intention of sharing these images with an online community. Producing content for online spaces involves an extension of movement into actual space beyond the comportment of the folded body. When users move away from

their home computer screens to capture images and/or perform in them their practices become an extension of online relations. As people increasingly participate in recording the world in order to upload representations, everyday life becomes not only a productive resource to draw from but is itself staged for the sake of producing online representations. The silly actions performed unexpectedly in public places do not involve more participation than the attendance of any other social event organized online and subsequently recorded and then uploaded as images, though they do present the performative nature of social events and the image consciousness of participants in a more exaggerated form.

When spectators of flash mob videos respond to the call to participate as either performers or producers of visual content the spectatorial relations constituted by these representations provide a platform for engaging in social space. The spectatorial relations that I have described in this chapter involve thrills in the face of the manipulation of the rhythms of everyday life and the displacement of shock in order to identify with a position of mastery over the crowd as spectacle. When the spectator chooses to participate in a flash mob, pleasure in the unexpectedness of the event is replaced with the thrill of exhibitionism. The possible fear of embarrassment or individual scrutiny is mitigated by the simultaneous disappearance of the individual participant into the anonymous crowd. This sublimation into the crowd occurs at all points in the performance. Before it begins the participants cannot be differentiated from the non-participants. During the event participants emerge from the crowd but are simultaneously lost in the spectacle of their own numbers. Finally, the participants disappear once again when the flash mob ceases and the participants blend back into the

pseudo-anonymity of public space. The visual pleasure that derives from an imagined access to the real of everyday life and the subsequent manipulation of this real is experienced by the participant again in actual space. The participant plays the role of agent in that their actions are a necessary part of instigating the event. They are also exhibiting themselves as the object of observation for bystanders who are also made into objects of manipulation in the process. The participant plays the role of observer since they are performing for a future online audience that they will become.

Once the viewer chooses to participate in social space the category of spectatorship becomes limited due to its implied singularity. In order to account for the pleasures of stranger interactions in actual spaces I will draw on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space as I explore social networking sites as the primary organizational tool for flash mob events. To what degree can online representations be said to reproduce or alter the production process of a hegemonic abstract space? Flash mob events cannot be looked at as merely a spatial practice without also addressing how representations of space structure the experience of participants. The spectatorial relations that I have described in this chapter are a part of these representations of space along with the organizational technology of social networking sites. The demand for participation on the part of Internet spectators results in a transformation of tools of production and self-production into relations of consumption. The blurring of the lines between productive and consumptive practices that Coté and Pybus point to in the rationalization of affect and social relations on MySpace is reproduced in actual spaces, and flash mobs will be explored as one example of this rationalization.

Notes

[1] HellsYa. [Untitled weblog entry] *Metro Party – Fête dans le Métro.* Comment posted April 1st, 2007, http://www.newmindspace.com/metroparty.php (accessed February 27, 2009).

[2] Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006).

[3] White, *Internet Spectatorship*, 9-10.

[4] White, *Internet Spectatorship*, 10.

[5] White, "The Flat and the Fold: A Consideration of Embodied Spectatorship," in *Internet Spetatorship*, 177-197.

[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1991).

[7] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," (1970) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, 286-298 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[8] Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 289.

[9] Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 291.

[10] Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 294.

[11] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

[12] See for example, Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," *Cinema Journal* 25:4 (Summer 1986): 6-32. Here, Hansen focuses on early Valentino films in an attempt to account for female visual pleasure that is not based in masochism or identification with the male gaze.

[13] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 114-133.

[14] Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 117.

[15] Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 118.

[16] Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 115.

[17] Tom Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993): 71-84.

[18] "UNC Chapel Hill UL Flash Mob Rave," posted December 10, 2008 by clackalacky789: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruEMaDZWRcs (accessed March 8, 2009).

[19] Gunning, "Now You See It," 81-82.

[20] Gunning, "Now You See It," 82.

[21] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3-41.

[22] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 16.

[23] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 18.

[24] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 23.

[25] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 38.

[26] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 37-41.

[27] Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 129.

[28] Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: the Work of Being Watched* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2004): 70.

[29] Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 70.

[30] Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 95-114.

[31] "Our very own FLASH MOB/FREEZE!" posted November 19, 2008 by nanioushka: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aze1sVmQnu8 (accessed March 17, 2009).

[32] See: James Crabtree, "It's Time to Get Flash," *Newstatesman*, September 15, 2003: 12-13; Tom Vanderbilt, "On New Model Flash Mobs," *Artforum* 42:10 (Summer 2004): 71,74; Xavier González, "Urbanity and Sociability: Scenes and Transformations," *A+T* 27 (Spring 2006): 5-11; John Saunders, "Flash Mobs," in *Acts of Citizenship*, Eds. Engin F. Isen and Greg M. Nielsen, 295-296 (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008).

[33] Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, 413-441 (Ashgate, 2004).

[34] Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," 416.

[35] Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," 419.

[36] For an analysis of the introduction of augmented reality technologies into the Univerity of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology see: Darin Barney, "Terminal City? Art, Information and the Augmenting of Vancouver," in *Sampling the Spectrum: The Politics, Practices and Poetics of Mobile Communications*, eds. Barbara Crow, Michael Longford and Kim Sawchuk (University of Toronto Press, Forthcoming 2009).

[37] See: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 84-85.

[38] Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 7:1 (February 2007): 88-106.

[39] Coté and Pybus, "Immaterial Labour," 90.

[40] Coté and Pybus, "Immaterial Labour," 95.

Chapter Two: Social Networking, Gaming and Social Space

Everyday spaces are increasingly lived through networked communication technologies. This can be seen not only in the pervasiveness of mobile technologies like cell phones and laptops, but also in how social relations are shaped by online communications that are not necessarily mobile. Flash mobs and urban games are two examples of how online relations are motivating actions and interactions among strangers in urban space. The earliest urban gaming events relied on the participation of people who already shared a common interest and identified with an online community. The 'I Love Bees' urban game was designed in 2004 as a pervasive advertisement for the then soon-to-be-released *Halo 2* video game. Viewers discovered a hidden url in a trailer for *Halo 2*, which led to the first clue in the 'I Love Bees' urban game and which eventually included up to 4000 participants. The players were driven to participate in what is now known as an urban game through a prior interest in the entertainment provided to them by the *Halo* franchise. People were incorporated into the world of the game through collective problem solving that took place on message boards and blogs that are oriented towards an interest in this particular video game. Eventually, these online interactions led 4000 people to occupy 1000 payphones across the U.S. as players became convinced that a clue would be given over one of these phones. The earliest flash mobs, in contrast, were organized through anonymous email chains. The messages were passed on from person to person with little consideration for the particular interests of the recipients. According to Bill Wasik, the self-proclaimed originator of flash mobs, those who participated in these first events were driven by a desire to be a part of the “next big

thing" regardless of the content.[1] Urban gaming is now represented in an annual "Come Out and Play" festival in New York City, while flash mobs are now primarily organized through event and group pages on the social networking site Facebook.

Flash mobs and urban gaming raise questions about how face-to-face stranger relations in urban space are rearticulated by online communications.[2] New communication technologies are often understood to weaken local ties as they foster intimacy with distant or bodily absent others. Cell phones and iPods, for instance, have been associated with the breakdown of the spontaneous interactions in public space that are necessary for creating a sense of community or place.[3] While I find these accounts of modern alienation generally convincing, the stranger relations encouraged by flash mobs and urban gaming appear to provide an exception to this more generalized condition. In the case of these practices, the anonymous and placeless relations that are the basis of online communications are spectacularly manifested in concrete locations such as streets, metros, parks, and malls. I will argue in this chapter that flash mob and urban gaming events, while they are enacted in concrete spaces, are not a return to local ties but an expansion of the dominance of a homogenizing abstraction of space that directly impinges on social relations. The content of the social relations that are produced through online communication are a manifestation of the capitalist restructuring of spatial relations; online relations are not only the result of new spatial arrangements, but the means through which they are produced and reproduced.

In most of the writing about online communication, the concept of social space is treated as transparent and politically neutral. For example, in one of the few academic essays on urban gaming, Jane McGonigal, a leading designer in this new field of gaming

and the creator of 'I Love Bees,' argues that urban games reveal how proximate relations can enable social networks to increase to sizes previously not thought possible.[4] McGonigal argues that the "scalability" of social networks, or online communities, has been limited by thinkers who do not take proximate relations into account. The health of an online community, she tells us, is determined by the levels of density and mutuality that are found in communications between nodes in a network. Density refers to the number of connections between nodes, while mutuality refers to the amount of opportunity for two-way communication. According to current social network theory, the mutuality and density of a community begins to decline at a threshold of 150 members. In order to support her claim that urban games represent meaningful online communities that can exceed this threshold by the thousands, McGonigal argues that density can be achieved through extra-linguistic means. Specifically, she asserts that like the grooming habits of apes, physical engagement cements bonds between community members who would otherwise be unable to sustain relationships based on verbal communications. In the process of an urban game, players reinforce the density of their connections through physical play with a large group. The number of connections between members is multiplied by the ability to interact with many people simultaneously without paying particular attention to each individual involved. She also reworks the idea of mutuality when she argues that two-way communication does not need to take place within a group but can be a collective process whereby the group projects a collaborative message outwards to an audience. This is similar to the collectively produced displays of flash mob performances.

McGonigal's attempt to account for the influence of local, physical interactions on the connections made in online social networks is a welcome addition to an area of research that tends to emphasizes the absence of proximate relations. I find her analysis limited, however, in its treatment of space, which is conceived, from her perspective as a game designer, as something that is empty, neutral, abstract and homogenous. This abstract tableau is a space into which networked communities are projected, and where they can interact, while the space remains unaltered by their activities. The communities in turn are not limited or affected by spatial relations. This common sense understanding of space as an empty medium has been critiqued by Henri Lefebvre, who considers the abstraction of space to be closely bound to the reproduction of capitalist social relations.[5] In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that social space is not given, but produced and reproduced through a conjunction of *spatial practices*, *representations of space* and *representational spaces*. Lefebvre's triadic model of social space moves away from the dualistic opposition between structure and agency, or from seeing space as either purely physical or purely mental. By putting forward these terms he rejects a concept of space as a passive medium in which social relations operate and argues for space that is active, operational, and instrumental.[6] By working with Lefebvre's concept of the production of space, we will be better able to understand how new spatial practices, as seen in urban games and flash mobs, are situated within ongoing processes of spatial production and transformation.

My analysis of social relations begins with a spatial analysis of flash mob and urban gaming events that places emphasis on the *representations of space* provided by social networking sites. Within Lefebvre's framework, I will analyze Facebook, the social

networking site most commonly used to organize flash mobs, as a dominant *representation of space* that structures the social relations that predominate in these events. I will then turn to more particular cultural traits as I look at how these practices are situated in relation to subcultures.

Social Networking and the Production of Space

The production of space involves the dialectical interaction between three terms, referred to as a "dialectic of triplicity" by Rob Shields, that Lefebvre associates with the *perceived*, the *conceived*, and the *lived*.[7] *Spatial Practice,* the first term, is aligned with the perceived and implies a certain level of competence and performance on the part of the members of a society. It is the phenomenological aspect of spatial experience. *Representations of space* are conceptual in nature and are typically the dominant or hegemonic spaces of a culture. Lefebvre associates them with verbal signs, and in our contemporary social space, with the spatial representations of scientists, urban planners, designers, technicians, and social engineers. *Representational spaces* are aligned with space as it is directly lived and therefore it is the space of inhabitants and users. *Representational spaces* are experienced through symbols and images and imply a relation to history. As he argues, "this is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."[8]

Lefebvre identifies a number of spaces that have existed in the history of western culture and that can be roughly associated with different societies, historical periods, and modes of production. These spaces include: absolute/natural space, religious/mythical

space, historical space, abstract space, contradictory space, and differential space. The most recent spaces have not succeeded and replaced previous spaces over time, but rather, previous spaces continue to exist and underpin the present social space. The relation of these spaces in the present can be thought of as having a sedimentary structure, with deeper layers providing a platform for higher ones and with modulations that continue to produce ripples and ruptures from below.

Abstract space is closely aligned with the conditions of twentieth-century capitalism and is therefore the most pertinent to this analysis. Lefebvre defines abstract space as operating according to visual, geometric, and phallic principles. Abstract space operates according to a logic of visualization where the visual sense is emphasized above all others and the conditions of spectacle reduce social life to the deciphering of messages in the form of images or texts.[9] It entails a Euclidean conception of space that homogenizes space and makes it easily reducible to a two-dimensional plane. Finally, the phallic element produces displays of masculine violence in the form of vertical constructions that create the illusion of the opacity of power. Lefebvre explains: "as for the phallic, it fulfills the extra function of ensuring that 'something' occupies this space, namely, a signifier which, rather than signifying a void, signifies a plenitude of destructive force, and a space taken up by an 'object' bearing a heavy cargo of myth."[10]

Since the time of Lefebvre's writing, online representations have proliferated and become an important element of spatial production. Often conceived in terms of a virtual "space," the Internet reflects the geometric and visual traits of abstract space.[11] Predominantly image and text-based (though sound also plays an important role in certain online relations), the Internet fulfills the tendency of abstract space to reduce social life to

the deciphering of messages by the eyes. The flat space of the screen entails the geometric element wherein web browser applications present a homogenous space that organizes web content. On the other hand, the verticality of masculine power and violence seems to run counter to the common understanding of the Internet as a horizontally extending network without a centre. The signs of plenitude that represent the power of abstract space are for Lefebvre best seen in vertical monuments and high modernist skyscrapers. I will turn to Facebook to explore the geometric and visual bias of online representations in more detail and in the process will point out a few of the contradictions that are inherent to abstract space.

In the previous chapter, I argued that social networking sites represent a shift in power relations. Disciplinary power has lessened in importance in relation to a diffused system of biopower. The profile pages of social networking sites allow spectators to organize images and texts in an ongoing construction of identity. In the process, mutual surveillance becomes normalized and social life is increasingly rationalized by capital as affective relations become a source of social capital for the participants and surplus value for the site owners. When an individual joins Facebook, they are given a profile page where they can upload photos, videos, and status updates. The profile page also contains a feature known as a "wall" where friends can post comments that are visible to all of the user's other friends. The user also has access to all of his or her friends' profile pages. The home page is personalized to each user and is where all of the recent activity by friends is compiled. Anytime a user uploads content, posts a comment, or changes their profile page, friends are alerted to this activity on their own home pages. Group pages can be created around a chosen topic and users can post comments to the wall and

discussion topics once they join the group. Event pages can be created in order to advertise an event. Invitations can be sent through this page and the profile images of those who plan to attend are shown, along with those who have declined the invitation and those who have been invited but have not responded.

The social relations on Facebook may or may not be supplemented by face-to-face relations in daily life. The online interactions are not in real time; in accordance with much online activity, looking at images, reading texts, and posting content are the primary modes of experiencing sociality in the social network. What is interesting about Facebook and the quality that aligns it most clearly with abstract space is the highly conceptual and schematic nature with which the social world is represented. Like the quantifying gestures of planners, designers, architects and social engineers that reduce social life to measurements or two-dimensional plans, Facebook presents a homogenous and fragmented image of social space. The user is able to visualize their social world as a series of compartmentalized groupings through a feature on the home page that organizes friends according to their relationship with the user. This fragmenting system of categorization is complemented by the homogenizing layout that affords each user the same quantity of visual space. The same basic information, layout and social space is afforded to your friend's two-month old baby, your boss, your sister, or the acquaintance you met at a party but barely know. A structured coherence is imposed on these very different relations that are each placed within the representation of a social totality. A seductive role is offered to each user as they become the designer, manager, and spectator of their own social universe that is laid out before their eyes and subject to their manipulations. While Facebook does not represent a space in the literal fashion of an

architect's blueprint, the highly abstracted web of relations visible on the screen align it with the conceptual level of spatial production, or in Lefebvre's terms, a *representation of space*.

This *representation of space* enables the externalization of the management of social relations. We can find precedents for this schematic representation of social relations in school year books, photo albums and bulletin boards. Unlike these precedents Facebook is much more dynamic since most users update their profile page at least daily. In July 2009, it was reported that people spend more time on Facebook than any other website.[12] This indicates that the management of social relations through visual and textual representations is becoming far more generalized and time consumptive than the previous methods mentioned. Each user is given a limited ability to manipulate the way that relations are represented through their profile. Since Facebook is personalized, there are as many schemas as there are individuals. Still, the common format makes them appear strangely similar. The annihilation of differences is a central feature of abstract space. However, while the goal of this productive process is homogeneity, abstract space is not in reality homogeneous. It contains contradictions that arise not only from the sublimated presence of absolute space, religious space, and historical space, but also from its own internal contradictions.

Many examples could be explored that reveal how the Facebook *representations of space* are trialectically mediated with *spatial practices* and *representational spaces*. Here I will focus on flash mobs and urban gaming since they are primarily a manifestation of stranger relations. On Facebook, the event page is an important organizing tool for real-

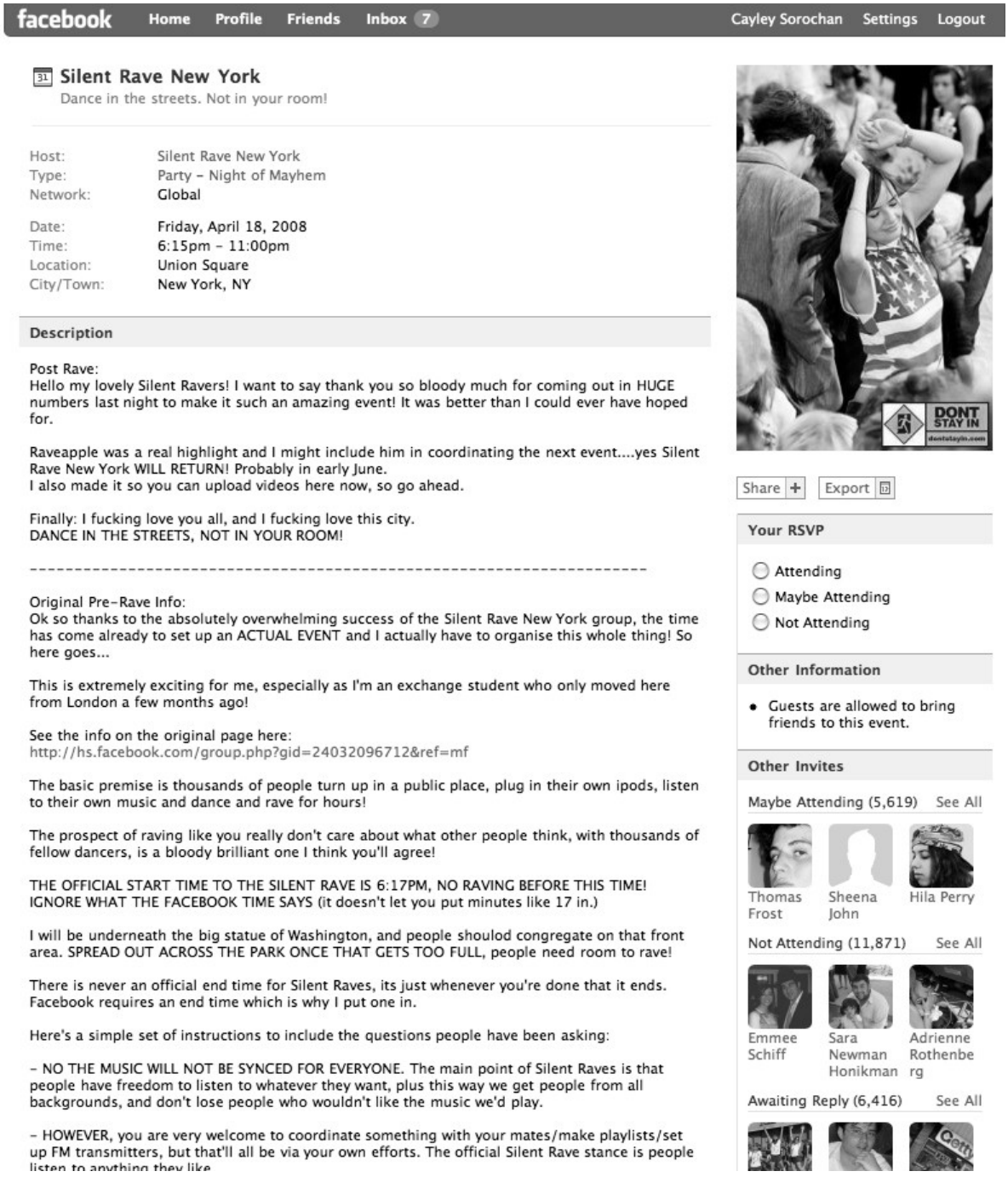

Figure 2.1

world meetings between friends. However, like the group page, it is also a space where personal networks open up into a broader realm of stranger relations. In April 2008, a

British exchange student in New York City created an event page on Facebook in order to organize the first major American silent rave [Figure 2.1].[13] On April 18th, roughly one week after the event was posted online, up to 7000 people converged at Union Square in order to create the largest silent rave to date. In the week preceding this flash mob, thousands of people had used the event page to confirm their planned participation. Unlike other forms of event advertising, the event page allows a quantitative and visual scrutiny of the probable participants before it takes place. The images and names of all of those who confirmed that they would attend and those that had been invited are visible on the event page, though the profile pages of these strangers cannot be accessed [See the lower right-hand corner of Figure 2.1]. Users can assess these representations qualitatively as they decide whether or not to include themselves in the flash mob. The event page also features a counter that shows the number of people likely to attend, allowing for a quantitative evaluation [See the bottom section of Figure 2.2].

This last feature is of particular importance for flash mobs because whether or not the event is deemed a success is often related in part to the size of the mob that converges. A number of flash mob videos emphasize this with titles such as: "World's Biggest Flash Mob (Attempt) Tokyo 2008," "World's Biggest Freeze Flash Mob in Paris OFFICIAL VIDEO," and "Scotland's Largest Flashmob - ABDN Flashmob #1 - The Day Aberdeen Stood Still."[14] The larger the mob, the more awe-inspiring is the spectacle. Size is also important due to the protection afforded the individual by the mass. A fundamental aspect of the thrill of the flash mob, as I argued in the previous chapter, is being sublimated in the crowd. Participants want to be both seen and yet invisible. The flash crowd enables people to behave in public in ways that are out-of-the-ordinary and

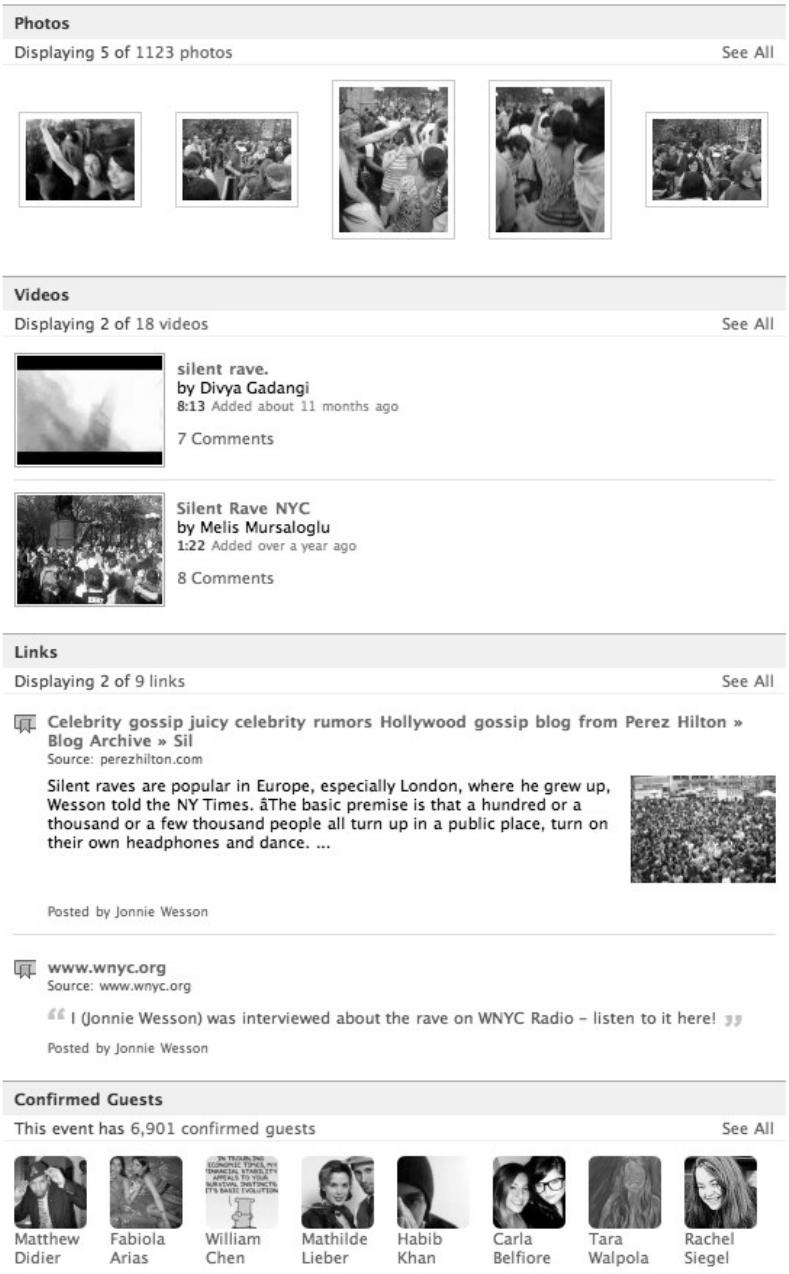

Figure 2.2

without feeling embarrassed by placing themselves under personal scrutiny. The Facebook event page reassures potential participants that the flash mob will be large enough for them to hide within, and therefore will be an enjoyable event. This need to

confirm the potential size of the mob can also be seen after the event in the flash mob videos uploaded to websites. As a participant, the flash mobber is not in a position to observe the mob as a whole. By watching the videos afterwards, participants can visualize the size of the mob and verify whether the event materialized the desired mob-like effect.

Lefebvre points to the contrast between quantity and quality as being an important contradiction of abstract space. "Not only is it [abstract space] quantifiable as geometric space," he writes, "but, as social space, it is subject to quantitative manipulations: statistics, programming, projections – all are operationally effective here."[15] While the disappearance of qualitative space is the dominant tendency, Lefebvre also argues that it returns in a weakened form as the consumption of space. In the realms of tourism and leisure, space is consumed by people searching for an escape from abstraction in natural spaces where the body and desire return to the forefront of experience. The desire for the qualitative remains unfulfilled, however, since the consumption of space is again exploited by industry in the form of property speculation, gentrification, and tourism. The consumption of leisure spaces amounts to an imitation of natural life or a "culture of the body."[16] The extent of our separation from nature is evident when Lefebvre notes that "the space of the countryside, as contemplated by the walker in search of the natural, was the outcome of a first violation of nature."[17] Flash mobs are an example of this contradiction between the space of consumption and the consumption of space. In a flash mob the particular number of participants is a significant expression of the quality of the mob. Further, this quantitative orientation derives from a desire for a qualitative social space. Like tourists who flock to the countryside in search of a more natural pace of life,

flash mobs reveal a desire or nostalgia for a feeling of belonging and community among strangers. At the same time, the very structure of their interactions, ephemeral, anonymous and detached from place, prevents this desire from being fulfilled.

A second contradiction of abstract space is that between the global and the local, or homogenization and fragmentation. Whereas global refers to the ability to deal with space on a worldwide scale, the fragmentary/local refers to the subdivision of space for purposes of buying and selling.[18] "Under its homogenous aspect," Lefebvre writes, "space abolishes distinctions and differences, among them that between inside and outside, which tends to be reduced to the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm. Simultaneously, this same space is fragmented and fractured, in accordance with the demands of the division of labour and of the division of needs and functions..."[19] In light of Internet technology, this contradiction has become more acute. In its global or homogenizing aspect, the Internet allows for the same information to be accessed from any connection site. Moreover, the amount of information that can be accessed from any single point is vast. The accumulation of power, knowledge, and culture that Lefebvre associates with urban centres has partially undergone a process of decentralization.[20] At the same time, the inequalities of spatial organization have also continued to grow. Economic disparity is organized spatially in the form of ghettos and peripheral neighbourhoods, and an itinerant yet spatially contained and managed homelessness. In contrast, city centres are gentrified, with workers pushed to the outskirts, or in the opposite case, they are abandoned while the surrounding suburbs become a refuge for wealthier individuals. There is a quality of sameness to online representations of flash mobs despite the variety of cities around the world where events have been located.

Generally, flash mobs are an urban phenomenon that takes place in gentrified areas that are attractive to tourists, centrally located and busy. The minimal influence of locality on these events is noticeable in the way that the same type of actions are imitated and easily transposed to different places, without any alteration of the content to reflect local interests. The flash mob event pages enable proximate relations. However, rather than reflecting relationships that are grounded in a particular locality, these relations are modeled on a globalized and placeless notion of sociality.

The anonymous, temporary, and contractual relations seen in a flash mob could be associated with what Marc Augé has called the non-places of supermodernity.[21] Augé argues that in contrast to places, which he defines as "relational, historical, and concerned with identity," non-places are non-relational, non-historical, and based in anonymity.[22] Non-places include areas of passage and exchange such as airports, buses, metro systems, trains, shopping centres, banking machines, highways, and roadside rest areas. Increasingly large portions of contemporary life are lived within these non-places where individuals exist in solitude while simultaneously being a part of a collectivity. He considers it the task of the anthropologist to attempt an ethnography of non-places. This shift should not be seen as simply an anthropology of the "near," which implies a particular focus on Western culture. Non-places are ubiquitous on a global scale and cannot be bounded within any single culture but permeate all places to some degree. He writes: "it is not Europe that is under scrutiny but contemporaneity itself, in all the aggressive and disturbing aspects of reality at its most immediate."[23] It is not difficult to see Augé's non-places as being a result of the abstraction of space. Some of the non-places he describes are also popular areas for flash mob events. Along with the streets

and parks that we can perceive as retaining a certain degree of "placeness," flash mobbers commonly use the more clearly homogenous non-places of malls and metros.

In the following section, I will analyze a particular urban game in order to concretize how online *representations of space* are manifested in actual space and will reflect on the kinds of social relations that are produced in the process. As will become clear, urban gaming reflects traits of abstract space even more obviously than flash mobs due to its affiliation with the video gaming industry, its top-down production by professional game designers or artists, its need for specialized technologies, and a gaming structure oriented towards differentiating winners and losers.

Cruel 2B Kind: Spatial Appropriation by Design

On September 23, 2006, New York may have seemed a bit different than usual to the tourists and locals who walked along Broadway that Saturday afternoon. A number of people were surprised by strangers who approached them with out-of-place compliments like "I love your shoes" and "Way to go!" Others were asked if they required any help or were blown kisses, given curtsies and bows. A few people who were in the know could be overheard replying "you are too kind" before responding with a compliment of their own. This kind behaviour was not due to a miraculous change in attitude on the part of New Yorkers. The compliments passed around were in fact secret weapons that could kill opponents in an affable version of the game 'Assassins.' Designed by Jane McGonigal, the game was called 'Cruel 2B Kind' and involved nearly 100 people who were paired off, and roamed Broadway between 58th and 48th searching for others, who they could kill and absorb into their own team. Part of the fun was that the players did

not know who was playing, which resulted in the many uncanny interactions with strangers who received compliments that may have pleased, confused, or annoyed them, but could not result in a kill.

'Cruel 2B Kind' was played during the Come Out and Play festival, which provides a platform for game designers to try out their urban game designs. While urban games are occasionally planned in the more casual and spontaneous way of flash mobs, they have, since their inception, been more closely aligned with the gaming industry and a top-down system of production and control. Corporate involvement can be seen in the 'I Love Bees' example as well as in 'Manhattan Story Mashup,' a game played during the 2006 Come Out and Play festival sponsored by the Nokia phone company that had players creating picture stories with a wireless camera phone. In a review of the festival in *Advertising Age*, Noelle Weaver describes how her participation in the games inspired her to think up new forms of pervasive advertising. She writes: "Candy Land comes to life for Wrigley. The game of Life is created on the grid of the city street for Visa. What else can we dream up?"[24] This scenario illustrates how playfulness in urban space can be rerouted towards a lifestyle identification with brands that is cemented by the pleasurable memories of the gaming experience. This is not to say, as some writers fear, that flash mob events organized from the bottom up are an authentic or uncorrupted space of freedom that risk cooption by corporations. Weaver's ideas of pervasive advertising seem to be antiquated in comparison with how deeply integrated online consumer/producers have already become in processes of online publicity.

The games created for the festival are more complicated than the simple directives that produce flash mobs. Professional game designers not only invent the games, but often

act as ‘puppet masters,’ managing the game play in real-time from remote locations with wireless technology. The scoring in 'Cruel 2B Kind,' for example, is tracked through a secret key word that each team must surrender once they are killed. The word is sent by cell phone to the main computer or puppet master who adds the appropriate points onto the teams score as the game unfolds. Other games require GPS technology in order to track the location of other players in the game and to strategize the takeover of city territory. A game like 'Go Game,' played during the New York festival, requires that players record and upload their public stunts, which involve costumes and creative performances. In this case, the urban game can clearly be included in the complex of participatory spectatorship. But unlike the flash mob, the directives for the 'Go Game' stunts are downloaded onto cell phones one after another during the duration of the game. The players can also keep track of their ranking and speed in real time through their wireless enabled phones.

In many urban games, therefore, the predominant *representation of space* is not only online representations of social relations, but also the design of the game, conceptualized by the designer and enacted by the players. Of course, while the game structures the players' movements to a certain degree, there is a level of spontaneity of movement as participants interpret city space. In “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau argues that the act of walking in the city is a type of speech act.[25] In this approach to space, the movements of pedestrians are seen as creative acts of appropriation of the dominant spatial system. This is similar to the way that speech acts appropriate the rules of language systems in the process of individual expression. De Certeau follows Lefebvre’s groundbreaking work to assert that urban space is a site of political struggle. He writes:

"beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer."[26] According to de Certeau, although city-planners and law enforcement attempt to administer the movement of people in public space according to a goal of total transparency and visibility, spatial practice always implies a level of spontaneity that escapes this total control.

The field of game design, like that of city planning and advertising, is based on attempts to administer bodies in space. The end goal of design is to increase the pleasure of the participants, but this should not obstruct us from recognizing the structure of the designed game as a method of management. The GPS systems used during certain games provide an example of an even more intensive level of measurement than de Certeau could have imagined since even the spontaneous, individual movements of players can be tracked in real-time and represented as points within a grid of rational transparency. The sphere of leisure, as Lefebvre has pointed out, is not immune to forms of domination and control. We could see game design and the management of the game-play in real-time by designers as another kind of *representation of space* that defines the space of the city and of the movement of the gamers. There is clearly a tension in urban gaming between the structure of the game designed from above and the spatial practices enacted by the users of city space who choose to participate within these structures. De Certeau argues that the present is marked by a contradiction between "the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of appropriation" and goes on to assert that "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life."[27] Although spatial

practices always contain a limited level of spontaneity and creativity that cannot be predetermined by planners or designers, the question remains as to whether or not the space of possibility opened up by urban gaming has the potential to politicize city space in any significant way. Of key importance to this question is the particular content of the games that people choose to play and the level of control users have over their production.

I will focus my analysis of social spatialization on the above mentioned 'Cruel 2B Kind' urban game.[28] During the course of the game certain dominant *spatial practices* are countered by the behaviour of the players. The acts of kindness that are utilized as the secret weapons of the game slightly exceed the typically accepted grounds for interaction with strangers in public spaces. The gestures of blowing kisses, bowing and curtsying for strangers are excessively warm, as are the compliments given in unison from the members of a team. As the game progresses and the teams grow increasingly large, the transgression of dominant codes grows more apparent. The teams must perform their gesture or proclaim their statement in unison, creating a louder and more visible spectacle for bystanders as the groups grow to incorporate everyone playing the game within two teams of 75 gamers, performing for one another in a final standoff. Large groups walking together on city streets evoke the *spatial practices* of paraders or protesters. However, these groups lack any signs that would codify them as either of the above. The dominant *representation of space* that is being countered with this playful use of space would be the designs of city-planners that construct this area of the city with particular uses in mind. This *representation of space* is enforced through surveillance and police mechanisms that monitor the public for signs of strange behaviour. The

representational space created by the game, experienced as a fully-lived moment by the gamers, would be the enjoyment of physical interaction with strangers in public spaces (which includes both bystanders and the other players who are unknown before the game unfolds) and the feelings of inclusion in a collective performance of creative and spectacular acts.

What the above account leaves out, and what writers who take urban gaming and flash mobs to be a political appropriation of space forget, is the abstraction of the game itself and the social relations it produces. While on the surface, these playful appropriations of space could be seen as challenging the dominant uses of street space, they are in fact operating in accordance with the management of city space. If we understand these *spatial practices* as making sense in light of a *representation of space* that includes game design and/or social networking, then we must look more closely at the *representational space* or lived space that is experienced as a symbolic social world. *Representational spaces* should not simply be thought of as moments of contestation, play or subversion. The lived experience that energizes space provides an emotional force to spatial production that can become an intense site of ideological identification. In the following sections I will explore aspects of *representational space* that provide an emotional coherence to spatial production that may work to mask the contradictions produced by the abstraction of social space. While flash mobs, in contrast to urban games, maintain a level of spontaneity and unpredictability due to the more democratic nature of their production and the pointlessness of the performances (that are not part of a gaming structure), they too operate according to an abstraction of social relations. This

abstraction can be seen primarily in the way that social interactions are uprooted from locality.

Unknown Friends: Strangely Familiar Encounters in Street Space

The most obvious attribute that defines urban gaming is the gaming structure of the events that involves competition between participants, winners and losers. In one sense the gaming context of the practices makes them easier to understand, thereby mitigating the experience of the uncanny that the purposelessness of flash mob events might provoke. The fun derived from a flash mob is more clearly associated with the appropriation of public space and exhibitionism, while the fun of urban gaming derives mainly from the experience of the encounter and interaction with others. It is at this level of the encounter that urban gaming may contain the most interesting possibilities for re-imagining city space.

In his article "Everyday Speech," Maurice Blanchot asserts that a person in the street is always on the verge of becoming politicized.[29] In reflecting on the anonymity and disinterestedness of the subject in street space, he writes: "the man in the street is fundamentally irresponsible; while having always seen everything, he is witness to nothing. He knows all, but cannot answer for it, not through cowardice, but because he is not really there."[30] This aspect of street space resonates with the pleasure that is derived from urban gaming in that participants feel the thrill of taking part in something special while remaining an anonymous part of the crowd. Blanchot remarks that "when we meet someone in the street, it comes always by surprise and as if by mistake, for one does not recognize oneself there; in order to go forth to meet another, one must first tear oneself away from an existence without identity."[31] For the urban gamers this lack of identity

within the crowd takes on the dimension of a masquerade as they actively attempt to hide their identity from others. Their performative actions and the transgression of dominant spatial codes momentarily draw attention, but just as quickly the players disappear after their actions have ceased. The anonymous character of street crowds allows them to act out without having to bear the responsibility of their actions.

The structure of the game removes the typical barriers to stranger interaction that exist in public space. It provides a motivation to engage with others in the street that does not exist in most contexts. The encounters with others in the street take on two different forms: those that involve the general public that is not aware of the game (outsiders), and those that involve other players (insiders). While keeping in mind the variability of the different interactions that occur in different games, encounters with outsiders are generally limited by the fact that the players who engage them either construct a separation through a spectacular act that divides them into performers and audience, or the players approach them in an instrumentalizing way as the unknowing objects of a game in which they are obstacles or tools. In 'Cruel 2B Kind,' for example, some unaware bystanders are given compliments that are not genuine. The game cleverly includes weapons that may contribute to a positive feeling between strangers; however, on the part of the players no genuine encounter with others is possible since they are objectifying these strangers for their own undisclosed ends.

The most valuable encounter with strangers actually occurs between players of the game. In order to cooperate and compete within the structure of the game a certain amount of trust is extended between players who are unknown to one another. This mutual trust is based on the need to respect the rules of the game in order to guarantee a

satisfactory outcome for all involved. The knowledge that other insiders are a part of the crowd changes the relation of gamers to social space. In "The Un(known) City…or, an Urban Geography of What Lies Buried below the Surface," Steve Pile argues that "urban space vacillates between the reassuring solidity of knowingness and the sinister voids of unknowingness; in this, the city becomes strangely familiar."[32] In the context of urban gaming where the participant knows that the crowd contains other players but can't recognize them, the faces take on an extra strangeness as they are scanned with the eye of someone searching for a sign of familiarity. The crowd itself takes on this quality of being strangely familiar. It may be that the excitement experienced by the players of 'Cruel 2B Kind' is due to the uncanny effect that the (un)known crowd has on their experience of city space.

Pile argues that the experience of the uncanny is based in psychological repression of what is both feared and desired. In this particular case, the insiders represent the contradiction of an unknown community of friends that are dispersed among the strangeness of the urban crowd. This contradiction bears a direct resemblance to the unknown friends that people interact with in online environments. What is both feared and desired is a level of intimacy with strangers that would on the one hand threaten the boundaries and the autonomy of the individual, and on the other, foster a sense of community that is lacking for many people under conditions of late modernity. The opportunity to encounter an unknown community of strangers is therefore both unsettling and comforting. This same dynamic also holds for flash mobs even though the interactive aspects of the performances are often more basic and short-lived.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, de Certeau argues that neighbourhoods are in-between spaces that mediate between the public space of the city and the private space of the home.[33] He argues that the semi-privatization of space in the form of neighbourhoods is a poeticization of the city. He writes:

> the subject has refabricated it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and, as a consumer of space, imposes his or her own law on the external order of the city. The neighbourhood is thus, in the strongest sense of the term, an object of consumption that the dweller appropriates by way of the privatization of public space.[34]

The most generous interpretation of how urban games alter city space and social relations would be to construe it as a process of constructing mobile neighbourhoods that help alleviate the alienation from others that is felt, without the necessity of developing long-lasting or intimate relations with them. A section of the city that is temporarily taken over as game space becomes invested with a certain type of stranger relationality that allows for friendly, playful interactions among people in large crowds that would typically be regarded as threatening or embarrassing. An urban game may temporarily produce the safe and warm feelings of a neighbourhood, but without a foundation in physical structures or the kind of personal relationships developed over time that are grounded in local spaces. In the following section I will explore the particular cultural traits that inform the content of flash mobs and urban games, including childhood nostalgia. If we cannot understand these practices as entailing community or neigbourhood in a locally grounded sense, then perhaps we can make sense of these social relations in terms of a more spatially diffused subculture.

A Subculture of Convenience

Despite the fact that flash mobs and urban gaming are based in social relations with proximate others in actual spaces, these social relations reflect a homogenizing tendency of abstract space and remain unhinged from particular places. In the lived experience of those appropriating space there is also a poetic symbolism that makes the social space meaningful. For example, it's possible that the memory of childhood experiences of street games located in neighbourhoods is one powerful emotional draw that informs the *representational space* of lived experience in this context. The game "Manhunt," described in the introduction to this thesis, is based on the structure of common children's games, "tag" and "hide-and-go-seek." Newmindspace engage with explicitly childlike activities in their pillow-fights and bubble-blowing events. A thrill is also produced that is based in the unknown yet familiar quality of these relations that is perhaps founded in similar thrills of freedom and intimacy experienced through online social forums.

What Lefebvre refers to as *representational space* could also include the artistic or symbolic re-contextualization of objects and signs that Dick Hebdige argues is the basis of subcultures. In contrast to mainstream society where the meanings expressed through clothing, styles of speech, dance, pedestrian movement and gestures are naturalized, subcultural style is an intentional communication that draws attention to is own fabrication.[35] One of the primary ways that subcultures signify a difference from the naturalized order of the mainstream is to recontextualize commodities by subverting their typical uses and imaging new ones. Hebdige notes that his communicated difference is also an expression of a group identity.[36]

Aside from the temporary subversion of spatial codes in the flash mob performance, the participants of flash mobs do not display an identifiable style that differentiates them from the surrounding crowd. In fact, if they did, it would interfere with the very effect that they are trying to produce. However, we can identify the influence of particular subcultures and popular culture on the choice of events that flash mobbers invent. Silent raves and metro parties for example bear the influence of rave culture, while the pillow fights, bubble blowing battles, and sidewalk chalk drawing parties organized by Newmindspace draw on "emo" sensiblities, childhood nostalgia and the cuteness of Japanese pop culture. We can even detect a more recently empowered "geek culture" in these events, the zombie walks and alternate reality urban games in particular.

In the remainder of this section I will examine the silent rave phenomenon to examine how flash mobs differ from typical subcultures. If participants are not included or excluded on the basis of the typical subcultural signifiers, then on what basis is identification negotiated? It appears that group identity is defined more by the use of technologies than by other forms of symbolic status or distinction.

On April 18, at 6:17 pm, roughly one week after the event was posted online, up to 7000 people converged at Union Square in New York City's first large silent rave. Some wore the brightly colored clothing that has become typical of rave culture, others displayed a hip hop look or wore the garb of hipster culture, while others dressed in costumes – one as a bottle of mustard, two as hot chili peppers, and another as the pink panther. The gathering lasted late into the night with people dancing, talking, people-watching, photographing, video recording, and climbing on top of a statue in the square. The next day, videos were uploaded, digital photos were posted, blogs were written, and

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

comments were shared as the participants returned to the Internet where the event had originated [Figure 2.2].

The silent rave phenomenon began predominantly in England where it grew out of flash mob culture. What was originally referred to as mobile clubbing is one type of random flash mob behaviour that gained popularity in England, attracting up to hundreds of people at locations in London and Liverpool. Participants gather, usually at a metro station or park, and begin to dance to the music on their personal mobile music players [Figure 2.3 and 2.4]. The music remains silent to the people around them and the dancing rhythms are consequently wildly incoherent. After the large New York rave two more occurred at the same location in August and October, and more continue to surface in smaller cities across North America and Europe.

If the silent rave is compared to typical iPod use, its social character appears obvious. Dancers laugh and cheer, count down in unison, dance together, and turn their music down occasionally in order to speak to one another. However, in contrast to a typical rave, the musical isolation of the dancers and the disjuncture in the rhythms expressed between dancers could be seen as breaking down or perverting the collective nature of the event. In *Unlocking the Groove*, Mark J. Butler describes the dancing crowd in a rave as a "performing audience" that collectively influences the ongoing set of the DJ through the intensity of its movements.[37] This complex interaction between crowd and DJ creates the shared "vibe" of the event. Butler also discusses the individualistic nature of dancing to electronic dance music since there are no set steps, as in couple dancing, and each dancer must interpret the beat through their own spontaneous movements. He warns, however, that the individualistic nature of this dancing should not be overemphasized

because it is a very communal experience and dancers have a strong mutual influence on how the shared beat is interpreted.[38] In a similar argument, Charles Keil reflects upon the participatory nature of music, specifically in relation to the movement of listeners' bodies and the live performance of music, in contrast to the structural aspects of music.[39] Keil places participation at the center of identity and claims that it represents the opposite of alienation as he writes: "the social moments where I get these 'oneness' and 'urge to merge' feelings most forcefully are when I'm dancing at polka parties or salsa parties, swept up in a black church service, or making music."[40] He associates music and dance with a participatory consciousness that can help us get back into "synchrony with ourselves and with the natural world."[41]

Other writers have written about how the repetitive beat of electronic dance music is related to a disciplinary impulse. Water Hughes, in an article about disco music and gay subculture, argues that the act of submitting to the repetitive beat of disco is a method for reclaiming a construction of identity that was previously imposed from the outside.[42] "By submitting to its insistent, disciplinary beat," he writes, "one learns from disco how to be one kind of gay man; one accepts, with pleasure rather than suffering, the imposition of a version of gay identity."[43] In this case the beat is even more directly implicated in the constitution of community and identity. In an interesting twist on this theme, William McNeill has explored the history of dance and drill in military training where he argues that the synchrony of movements in military drill is an important aspect of cohesiveness and identification among soldiers.[44] The relation of synchronic movements to feelings of group cohesion could contribute to the experience of flash mob

events and reinforces Jane McGonigal's argument that non-verbal physical interactions can reinforce community bonds. Silent raves however, move in the opposite direction.

Silent raves pose an interesting question about the necessity of a shared beat in dance culture. If this communally experienced dance track is removed, what remains to create a cohesiveness and identification amongst participants? In a somewhat less idealized analysis of the supposed egalitarian and participatory nature of rave culture, Sarah Thornton points to the role of symbolic capital in negotiating identification.[45] Thornton works with the notion of cultural capital proposed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.[46] In his analysis, Bourdieu shows how class inequality is reproduced and displaced through symbolic distinctions of taste that are naturalized, yet arise out of class-based access to education and a particular cultural habitus. Thornton argues that youth subcultures develop due to the temporary exclusion that young people experience from the economic and symbolic power exercised by adults. Until they can assume their proper class position, young people are temporarily unhinged from direct class-based distinctions and therefore fill this void with a different symbolic economy: an economy of "cool" or what Thornton refers to as subcultural capital.[47] Thornton describes the functioning of subcultural capital:

> Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass. They are not innocent accounts of the way things really are, but ideologies which fulfill the specific cultural agendas of their beholders… [I'm] investigating the way they make 'meaning in the service of power' – however modest these powers may be... Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*.[48]

Thornton argues that rave culture in England operates through particular mechanisms of distinction in which "mainstream" taste cultures are looked down upon. The mainstream

Figure 2.5

Figure 2.6

Figure 2.7

Figure 2.8

culture of pop music and those who like it is feminized and associated with the unsophisticated tastes of the working class. If too many "Sharon and Nancys" start to turn up in a particular dance scene, then its underground authenticity is tarnished, and the "authentic" members of the scene must migrate elsewhere.[49]

What is noticeable about a silent rave is the diversity of subcultural and mainstream expressions that can be observed in the clothing and dance styles of the participants. In the videos posted on You Tube that represent the large silent rave in Union Square in April 2008, styles of dance are visible that range from rave light-stick dances, breakdancing, hip hop styles, ironic hipster dances, and the ubiquitous dance of our generation: non-descript shuffling, punctuated by the occasional bounce [Figure 2.5 – 2.8]. While these various gestures may give clues to the type of music being listened to by the dancer, the sounds remain a secret known only to them. In contrast to the hierarchy of distinctions that Thornton describes in relation to subcultures, silent raves are oriented towards inclusiveness. The lack of a predominant musical style, dance style, or fashion with which to define status hierarchies prevents subcultural capital from becoming fixed, and I would argue prevents these events from functioning as subcultures or scenes.

Thornton also points out the importance of spatial inclusions and exclusions in rave culture that are enforced by door policies at clubs and a pressure to only go to the right clubs that are more exclusive, limiting the amount of "mainstream" clubbers.[50] In contrast, silent ravers don't strive to differentiate themselves from an imagined mainstream by designating certain places with status. The parties take place in accessible public spaces. While those who are out of the loop stand in for the normal codes of

spatial practice, there is no negative value projected onto them in the way that clubbers in Britain refer to "Sharon and Tracy" with pejorative connotations. Participation itself, in contrast to non-participation, is the only value of the mob. In this sense, the lack of a specified content that organizes social relations reinforces the flash mob as a symptom of the participatory complex described in chapter one. The only limit to participation is an involvement in technological culture through a basic understanding of social networking sites. This limit is fairly arbitrary as no insider knowledge is required and amounts to most predominantly an age-based limit and the desire to participate. Since the usage of these sites is most highly concentrated among teenagers and twenty-somethings, this demographic makes up the largest part of most flash mobs, though there are also often many people in their 30s and 40s participating as well.

Perhaps what flash mob participants share is a differing relation to time rather than a difference that is defined in spatial terms. Subcultural style, as seen in clothing, gate, gesture, and speech, is inscribed on the body in a relatively more permanent way than the temporally specific behaviours of flash mobbers. The signs of subcultural difference are carried into varied everyday spaces and situations and colour interactions between people. Flash mob practice provides a thrill of subversion, but without the benefits of group identification or the consequences of challenging authority that result from a more permanent signifying practice. In the previous chapter I argued that spectators of flash mob videos derive a scopic pleasure from these images that is based in a temporality of the instant. A similar temporality is reproduced in the event itself, inasmuch as the connection between individuals and the feelings of group cohesion only exist for the duration of the event and evaporate once the performance ceases. While we might look

to online representations as sites of continuity where group meanings and identities are negotiated, very little interaction is evident between flash mobbers on Facebook group and event pages.[51]

This points to a significant drawback to the relative inclusivity of flash mobs in contrast to subcultures. Flash mobs encourage connections based on convenience insofar as participants need not confront differences among themselves. Silent raves for example allow people that may have very different tastes to come together and dance – with the important caveat that they do not have to actually listen to each other's musical choices or talk with one another. There is simultaneously difference and isolation, but not necessarily exchange. This recalls the structured solitude that Augé associates with non-places. It is difficult to imagine feelings of responsibility or attachment to the group when the only basis of relation is that each participant is equally free to disengage from those around them. Openness towards differences is predicated on a lack of commitment to a shared condition and the lack of a necessity for long-term relations. Taste may involve a displacement of class-based hierarchies, but it also provides a basis of connection between people. In flash mobs, rather than relations defined through distinction, relations are defined through distraction. In a mediated universe in which young people are pressured to provide accounts of themselves through profile pages and status updates, this sort of detachment may only symbolically serve the needs that are sacrificed everywhere else. The repression involved is inscribed in the online representations that ensue.

Another consequence of this temporality of the present is that the risk involved in subverting dominant codes is avoided along with the risk of confrontation. In his book

On the Internet, Hubert Dreyfus argues that the anonymity of Internet users allows for broad experimentation and access to information, but also encourages on-line interactions that lack a sense of risk and a commitment to causes or relationships.[52] These online interactions are also reflected in flash mob performances where individual flash mobbers will only risk standing out from the general crowd when a large group of others is guaranteed to join in. Otherwise, the preference is to behave according to the same spatial codes as those around you. The flash-like temporality of these events could be seen as a tactic for escaping control on the part of authorities like the police. One might argue that the lack of risk in this case points to the lack of an actual challenge to authority to begin with. The cause of these performances is, ostensibly, an aim at irreverence. The challenge to authority is arbitrary and one towards which members need not, and have not, committed to the point of accepting any serious risks or consequences.

The social spaces that are produced by flash mobs and urban gaming display the contradictions of abstract space. The schematic representation of social relations and the impetus towards quantification found on social networking sites reproduce the homogenizing and fragmenting tendencies of abstraction. The resulting social spaces reflect this tendency in their detachment from local environments and the inclusive, yet non-committal, relationships enjoyed by participants. Flash mobs are one example of the widespread influence of online social relations on social space. The "emptiness" of abstraction that can be seen in the tenuous nature of flash mob social relations, an emptiness that masks the very concrete manifestations of capitalist and state violence, can also be found in discourses of "participation." In the following chapter I will turn from processes of spatial abstraction towards an analysis of the avoidance of meaning or drive

towards irrationality expressed by flash mob participants and evident in the absurdity of their performances.

While flash mobs are predominantly conceptualized by participants as having no purpose aside from pointless fun or pranks, some groups assert that there is a political dimension to these activities. The Newmindspace organizers, for example, draw vaguely on the idea of "reclaiming public space." This phrase bears the influence of more explicitly political groups like Reclaim the Streets and presupposes a loss of public space to corporate or private interests. If flash mobs represent a social relation in which commitment, risk, and the confrontation of differences is avoided, their potential for constituting a politicized social space seems limited from the outset. However, this depends in part on how we understand publicity.

Social networking sites redefine relations between private and public spaces. While often defined in relation to one another, the terms public and private cannot be understood as a simple dichotomy. While public and private are thought of as defining the qualities of certain spaces, their meanings extend beyond a strictly spatial understanding. In the following chapter I will elaborate on flash mob publicity and how these events relate to contemporary political movements.

Notes

[1] Bill Wasik, "My Crowd, or, Phase 5: A report from the inventor of the flash mob," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2006 (New York: Harper's Magazine Foundation), 56-66.

[2] Whether or not community is an appropriate term for the semi-anonymous and placeless interactions that take place on the Internet has been an issue of debate for some time. In this chapter, the notion of community and what it designates does not interest me so

much as the content of the social relations that are being produced online and how spatial relations are being reorganized in light of these online relations.

[3] Michael Bull argues that mobile technologies contribute to a dialectic of "warmth" and "chill," whereby the greater our connectivity with distant others, the more impoverished our immediate urban spaces become. See: Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007).

[4] Jane McGonigal, "SuperGaming: Ubiquitous Play and Performance for Massively Scaled Community," *Modern Drama* 48:3 (Fall 2005): 471-491.

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1991).

[6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11.

[7] Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 119-120.

[8] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

[9] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 286.

[10] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 287.

[11] For a critique of the use of spatial metaphors in relation to online representations and virtual reality simulations see: Ken Hillis, *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity, and Embodiment in Virtual Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

[12] Sharon Gaudin, "Americans Spend Most Online Time on Facebook," *SFGate*, July 15, 2009, http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2009/07/15/urnidgns852573C400693880002575F40059DC3C.DTL&type=tech (accessed July 20, 2009).

[13] Silent Rave New York: http://hs.facebook.com/event.php?eid=10833732153

[14] See: "Word's Biggest Flash Mob (Attempt) Tokyo 2008," posted on January 10, 2009 by 101challenges: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0T1ZKb0K6rI (accessed May 18, 2009); "World's biggest Freeze Flash Mob in Paris OFFICIAL VIDEO," posted March 10, 2008 by CharlesNouyrit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtUNj2BNTsU (accessed May 18, 2009); and "Scotland's Largest Flashmob - ABDN Flashmob #1 - The Day Aberdeen Stood Still," posted March 15, 2009 by ABDNflashmob: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fmR677_-1k (accessed May 18, 2009).

[15] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 352.

[16] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 353.

[17] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 289.

[18] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 365.

[19] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 355.

[20] Despite this decentralization of information and the wider availability of certain products with the rise of e-commerce, urban centers continue to accumulate commodities and spaces that are not available in peripheral areas. On the importance of the objective world of things for meaningful community see: Darin Barney, "The Vanishing Table, or Community in a World That is No World," in *Community in the Digital Age,* eds. Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney, 31-52 (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

[21] Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1995).

[22] Augé, *Non-places*, 77.

[23] Augé, *Non-places*, 12.

[24] Noelle Weaver, *Advertising Age*, posted September 26, 2006: http://adage.com/smallagency/post?article_id=112117, (accessed May 19, 2009). For more projections of business interests in the urban gaming phenomenon see: Chris Taylor, "Videogames Get Real," *CNN Money* posted Sept. 28, 2006 http://money.cnn.com/2006/09/27/magazines/business2/realworld.biz2/ (accessed May 19, 2009).

[25] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1988).

[26] de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 95.

[27] de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 96.

[28] Daniel Terdiman, "Killing Gamers with Kindness," *CNET* (Sept. 24, 2006) ttp://www.news.com/Killing-gamers-with-kindness/2100-1043_3-6118879.html (accessed May 19, 2009).

[29] Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 17.

[30] Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 17.

[31] Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 18.

[32] Steve Pile, "The Un(known) City…or, an Urban Geography of what lies buried below the Surface," in *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, eds. I. Borden, J. Kerr, J. Rendell, A. Pivaro, 263-279 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 265.

[33] Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard & Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[34] de Certeau, *Living and Cooking*, 13.

[35] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routlege, 1979): 101.

[36] Hebdige, *Subculture*, 102.

[37] Mark J. Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006): 72-73.

[38] Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 73-74.

[39] Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues,* eds. Charles Keil and Steven Feld, 96-108 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[40] Keil, "Power of Music," 98.

[41] Keil, "Power of Music," 97.

[42] Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture,* eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, 147-157 (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

[43] Hughes, "Empire of the Beat," 148.

[44] William McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995).

[45] Sarah Thornton, "Moral Panic, the Media and British Rave Culture," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture,* eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, 176-192 (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

[46] See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1984).

[47] Sarah Thornton, "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital," in *The Subcultures Reader,* eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, 200-209 (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[48] Thornton, "Subcultural Capital," 201.

[49] "Sharon and Tracy" is a phrase used to refer to mainstream female clubbers in general, see Thornton, "Moral Panic," 178.

[50] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1996): 113-114.

[51] This lack of direct interaction between flash mob participants may change with the recent emergence of sites like Mashflob.com that claim to represent the worldwide flash mob community. This site functions as a social networking site for people interested in organizing or participating in flash mobs. See: http://www.mashflob.com/index.php

[52] Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001): 87-89.

Chapter Three: Publicity and Non-hegemonic Political Practice

Shortly after the first flash mobs occurred in 2003, a number of journalists, and later a few academics, construed the events as having a political effect, or as at least containing the potential to politicize social relations and social spaces. The spontaneous appropriation of public space on the one hand and the use of new communication technologies on the other, were taken to implicitly represent a contestation of power by means of democratic forms of organization, and this, despite the fact that no articulate political demands were put forward by the flash mobs in question. For many, the occupation of space evokes common protest tactics, while the use of cell phones, text messaging, and the web 2.0 applications associated with the organizing of these events is often believed to empower users and facilitate decentralized forms of organization.

Among those writers who argue that flash mobs have an important political dimension, we can identify two standard approaches. First, there are those who focus primarily on the technologies used to organize flash mobs. In this case flash mobs are seen as a demonstration of the tactical use of communication technologies. Their political nature is less a present reality than a future possibility. According to this line of thought, cell phones and Internet networks are seen as having an empowering effect on users. For example, in a short news article in *New Statesman*, James Crabtree argues that flash mobs indicate the power of new technologies to assemble groups of strangers.[1] Despite this association of technology with political empowerment, the political consequences of these technologies are not thought to inhere in the flash mobs themselves, but rather in overtly politicized uses of wireless mobile technologies. Crabtree presents WTO protests

as an example of "flash politics," a kind of political response on the part of the population that is unanticipated by those in power due to the quick, unpredictable spread of ideas via new technologies. Likewise, Judith A. Nicholson illustrates the political potential of the organizational technologies of flash mobs with examples of how cell phones were used to facilitate street tactics during anti-globalization protests and also how texting contributed to the "People Power II" uprising in the Philippines in 2001.[2] While the practices she describes here are worth studying in their own right in relation to mobile communications, she fails to connect these events to the flash mobs that emerged in North America in 2003 in anything other than surface similarity. It was e-mail lists and social-networking sites, and not cell phones, which were originally used to organize flash mobs.[3] The spontaneity of flash mobs is more apparent than real, in the sense that participants are usually notified at least a week or two in advance and therefore have no need to respond spontaneously to a last-minute text message. She goes on, as many other writers on the subject have done, to reflect on the possible political nature of flash mobs by discussing how the mob has historically been characterized as uncontrollable and inherently political.

This last point comes close to the second approach on the political nature of flash mobs. Writers in this grouping typically assert that flash mobs are politically interesting to the degree that they pose no explicit demands, and instead present an irrational irruption into everyday life that disrupts typical categories of experience. The following quote from Tom Vanderbilt is typical of this perspective:

> The apparent lack of an overt political program – or any other instrumentalist regimen – might have been the most political thing of all about flash mobs. In an age when protest marches must have permits and are corralled into warrens of secure space and when much of civic life takes place in carefully scripted and

> architecturally overdetermined ersatz public spaces such as shopping malls, there is something winningly subversive in the idea of the unannounced, spontaneous gathering for no apparent purpose.[4]

Here, flash mobs are understood to be political because they represent disorder and festivity in contrast to controlled spaces and the colonization of everyday life by capital. Within this contrastive logic, irrationality becomes a virtue, as any overt political program is associated with a programmatic, and hence controlling or authoritarian objective.

In both of these types of analysis a comparison is being made between flash mobs and the overt actions or underlying principles of contemporary activism as exemplified by the tactics of the alter-globalization movement. In this chapter I explore the ways that flash mobs are informed by the organizational logic that was developed by more overtly politicized groups such as Reclaim the Streets. However, rather than argue that the underlying similarities between activist practices and flash mobs reflects the political nature of the latter, I contend that flash mobs can be understood as a symptom of a crisis of political thought that derives in part from the logic of non-hegemonic political practice. To the degree that a "politics of the act" avoids defining a positive utopian vision it can be seen as a product of a generalized collapse of belief and the "demand to enjoy" that Slavoj Žižek associates with postmodern capitalism.[5] Flash mobs share with non-hegemonic political practice an emphasis on direct action. However, in the case of flash mobs, action is uncoupled from any meaningful articulation. To the degree that irrationality is put forward as the sole value of flash mobs, they can be understood as an example of the depoliticizing effects of the participatory complex, in which participation is seen as a good in itself.

Before turning to this discussion I will examine flash mobs in relation to different notions of publicity. The notion of publicness can be articulated in relation to spaces and their uses as well as to a political medium of critical discussion. Whether or not they are privately owned, the places chosen by flash mobbers for their events can be understood as public in the sense that they are highly visible and accessible to the general population. The occupation of parks, squares, metro stations, and malls for the sake of atypical collective behaviour can be interpreted as a particular claim to public space, even if this is not articulated in slogans or explicit demands. However, a claim on the use of space through action does not necessarily produce or become elaborated in a critical public sphere. Whether or not flash mobs are considered political therefore depends on how much importance is placed on rational-critical exchange as the basis of a politically active culture.

Flash Mob Publicity

I - Social Networking and the Habermasian Critique of Bourgeois Privacy

One of the most influential accounts of the public sphere is that provided by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[6] Habermas situates the historical appearance of the public sphere in the eighteenth century with the growing economic power of the bourgeois class and the decline of feudalism. He defines the public sphere as private people come together to form a public of rational-critical debate.[7] The discourse generated in this public sphere often functioned critically to counter public authority as embodied in the state and court society. Habermas situates the public sphere within the private realm as a space that mediated between private individuals and the

state. The cultivation of a sense of bourgeois interiority was one important precedent that led to the emergence of first a literary and later a political public sphere.

Habermas describes three qualities of the bourgeois public sphere that reveal its critical orientation. First, those who participated in a public put aside their status differences and private economic interests in order for the rationality of discussion to take precedence over inherited privileges.[8] Habermas makes it clear that although this ideal was never totally realized, the fact that it was accepted as a claim had important consequences for the transformation of social relations. Secondly, the wider diffusion of information made available by the emerging newspaper trade and the commodification of culture opened up new areas of experience to critical reflection. Cultural objects that were once completely bound up with the representation of the power of the Crown and the Church were separated from strictly ritualized events and spaces and could be accessed for a small fee. Along with this separation from the aura of religious and political authority came the burden of interpretation that was taken up by private individuals who constituted artistic and critical public spheres. Lastly, Habermas claims that the public sphere was in principle inclusive. Publics could not close themselves off or limit the extension of their membership. This is mainly a consequence of the importance of printed journals, newspapers, magazines and periodicals in maintaining the sense of an ongoing discussion among readers. "The issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance," Habermas writes, "but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate."[9] A public of rational-critical debate cannot be contained within a physical space or limited to members directly known to one another once commodification opens up the dissemination of ideas to an ever-expandable mass of anonymous readers.

In Habermas' analysis, the bourgeois public sphere, along with its function as the critical use of reason amongst private individuals, and as a medium for the critique of authority, began to decline from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This decline, which Habermas refers to as the refeudalization of the public sphere, is tied to the same commodification process that first opened up cultural products to critical reflection on the part of private individuals. Originally, Habermas argues, "the public for which [cultural products] became accessible related to them as objects of judgment and of taste, of free choice and preference."[10] At this time the function of the market was limited to the distribution of goods that were once only available to wealthy patrons and nobility. The educated bourgeois public that sought out these cultural products was prepared to critically engage with the meaning of the world from a position of self-clarity cultivated within the private sphere of the family. However, the reach of the market eventually extended beyond distribution to affect the content of the products themselves. As producers sought out broader markets of consumers for their goods the content became tailored to those who were less educated and more overworked. This broadened public of consumers desired relaxation and entertainment over more demanding content that required interpretation and engaged involvement. The market has fostered a culture-consuming public in place of a public ready to debate the meaning of the culture they are presented with. The result of this shift according to Habermas is that "the critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to 'exchanges about tastes and preferences' between consumers," and further, "even talk about what is consumed – 'the examination of tastes,' becomes a part of consumption itself."[11]

In the political realm the decline of the public sphere has meant the rise of public relations and marketing in place of rational-critical debate. For example, what once guaranteed the critical function of the press – protection from public authority by remaining in private hands – now threatens its existence. The separation of public and private spheres, Habermas contends:

> implied that the competition between private interests was in principle left to the market as a regulating force and was kept outside the conflict of opinions. However, in the measure that the public sphere became a field for business advertising, private people as owners of private property had a direct effect on private people as the public.[12]

Consequently, the role of the mass media has changed from the distribution of rational-critical debate produced by private people come together as a public, to the shaping of public opinion from the outset. Habermas describes how the state must also compete along with private corporations for the attention of a consuming public. This results in political parties that engage in the management of public opinion through public relations and advertising. Politics becomes less about reasoned debate than about the production of spectacles for consumers whose political participation is reduced to an expression of preferences. Inasmuch as the public sphere is shaped by public relations, Habermas contends that feudal features predominate once again as "The 'suppliers' display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow," and "Publicity imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation."[13]

Despite this decline of rational-critical debate, as described by Habermas, the public sphere is still assumed to exist. The justification for the claim that the capitalist parliamentary system is democratic depends on the idea of a critically debating public.

The rise of Internet technology is often associated with a reinvigoration of the public sphere. In contrast to broadcast media like television and radio, the Internet affords users ample opportunities to talk back, express their views on events, and engage in debate with other people from a wide range of backgrounds. The rhetoric of the Internet age, where communication technologies stand in for freedom, self-expression, and even democracy, has been critiqued by Darin Barney as a misrepresentation of its predominant uses. Barney argues that the majority of Internet time is spent performing activities of labour and necessity and not engaging in political debate.[14]

When people do choose to engage in debate online the effect is more likely to reproduce bourgeois ideology than create enlightenment. This is because, along with the decline of the public sphere, the private sense of bourgeois interiority cultivated within the intimate sphere of the family has also broken down. In order to come together with others to form a public, private individuals must have developed a space of interior freedom from which the clarification of the self can be communicated to others. Habermas argues that there is no longer institutional support for this kind of individuation. Guarantees for the autonomy of private people is now based in rights that are granted by the public authority of the state and not from the self-control of private economic life. Furthermore, a reversal has taken place wherein the products of the culture industry create illusions of bourgeois privacy.[15]

Habermas's analysis of the decline of the public sphere enables an understanding of social networking sites that goes against some common sense assumptions. While social networking has not been associated with politicization, it has been a cause of anxieties over changing relations between what is considered private and public. One main area of

contention is the ownership of content that is uploaded onto social networking sites like Facebook. Concerns about corporate surveillance and the sale of demographic information to private marketers are legitimate privacy issues that have been raised by commentators and Facebook users.[16] However, the anxieties that users experience in everyday life on the network are more closely related to their own personal social relations and self-representations than these more abstract privacy issues. When users participate on Facebook they must constantly decide who among their friends should know or see what. The ability to maintain separations between different sides of ourselves, different types of relationships, and various interests, becomes more difficult over time as our personal networks increase in size. The privacy controls that users can customize through their profile pages have grown increasingly elaborate since Facebook's inception with users now able to create friend lists with different levels of access to information. While in theory these customizable controls make it easier for users to control who can see what, the maintenance of these controls requires extra mental work. I would argue that over time, and despite these privacy controls, the tendency is for users to relax restraint for the sake of simplicity and give in to the idea that everyone in that individual's network will be able to see everything. In short, users are tempted to concede to a generalized publicity in place of a tightly managed network.

It is this kind of experience that supports arguments about diminished privacy or an erosion of the intimate sphere. According to Habermas's framework of the public sphere, social networking sites could be understood as one of the most intense sites of the continued reproduction of the illusion of bourgeois individuality. Fears about giving away too much of oneself to too broad a public reinforces the very idea that social

networking sites are spaces of transparency, where private individuals log-on to form a public. Anxieties that are perceived to be about an erosion of privacy boundaries in fact mask the more fundamental fear that there is no unique, private interiority behind the profile page to begin with. If looked at from this perspective, the work that goes into networked representations is the public construction of the semblance of private individuality, and the anxiety experienced is not that others will see too much, but that they will discover too little. Users must constantly produce content to create an illusion that an interesting life is being led, that reflection about and engagement with the world is taking place. While commenting on the content posted by friends is a standard activity on Facebook, rarely does it lead to debate over meaning, or interpretation. Commenting functions as a phatic form of communication that serves to keep the channel of communication open. It is therefore more about reinforcing affective relations than exchanging well-formed opinions. Posting content amounts to showing others what you are consuming. Most Facebook "interaction" is a clear example of what Habermas describes as a sham pseudo-public sphere, where tastes and preferences are exchanged and an "examination of tastes becomes a part of consumption itself."[17]

The social networking version of public relations allows users to identify with the processes of image management utilized by corporate and state actors. In contrast to the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes where individuals strive to achieve and communicate transparency and clarity of self, in the social network users are concerned with the management of their public image. We can recall Mark Coté's and Jennifer Pybus' analysis of the social network MySpace and their argument that the interface incorporates youth into an entrepreneurial logic of personal brand management.[18]

II - Changing Notions of Publicity: Flash Mobs as Counterpublics

The rational-critical debate that Habermas holds up as the core feature of the public sphere is clearly absent from flash mobs themselves. While Facebook pages may reproduce the fantasy of bourgeois privacy through the mechanism of a pseudo-public sphere of consumption, flash mobs dispense with any pretense to rationality, discussion, and debate, though importantly some participants and commentators do perceive a critical function in these performances. In order to understand how flash mobs could be seen to have a critical dimension we must turn to a theory of publicity that places less emphasis on the medium of rational exchange.

Michael Warner's theory of counterpublic spheres provides one approach to publicity that challenges the norms of engagement that structure public sphere interaction.[19] In Habermas's conception, the autonomy of private individuals is guaranteed by economic independence and a limited space of freedom from strictly commercial concerns within the intimate sphere of the family. With this privacy as a necessary foundation, individuals can form a public with others to debate matters of public relevance. In striving towards an ideal of universal human reason, however, the intimate experiences of the family realm must be put aside along with particular economic interests and status privileges. From the perspective of feminism and gay politics, this exclusion of gender relations and sexuality from public relevance is extremely problematic since it is predominantly within the intimate sphere that gender-based exploitation and homophobia is experienced. Warner argues that feminist and gay movements do not only seek to make issues of gender and sexuality publicly relevant by including them as topics of discussion within the norms of rational-critical debate. By politicizing sexuality and

gender these movements seek to transform "fundamental styles of embodiment, identity, and social relations – including their unconscious manifestations, the vision of the good life embedded in them, and the habitus by which people continue to understand their selves or bodies as public or private."[20] Warner contends that the norms of self-presentation that structure rational-critical debate are not a neutral or universal basis for discussion but in fact privilege dominant forms of masculinity. These dominant forms of publicness are so deeply ingrained that feelings of disgust, shame, and guilt are often triggered when they are transgressed.

Warner defines the aforementioned movements as counterpublics because members are aware of their subordinate status and understand themselves to be in tension with a more dominant public. In contrast to the attempted bracketing off of private experience, counterpublics maintain the relevance of their private experience to some degree. Warner defines them as "scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate."[21] They are therefore open to affective and expressive dimensions of language rather than strictly rational argumentation. Warner extends his definition of counterpublics to include youth movements and artistic publics that include members who may not otherwise be subordinate apart from their participation in counterpublic discourse.[22] The early punk movement in Britain would be a good example of a youth counterpublic that challenged dominant styles of embodiment in ways that could provoke disgust, embarrassment, and anxiety from adults and the media.[23] Examples of bodily transformations that once disturbed gender and class-based norms of public comportment included body piercing, garish makeup worn by both men and women, and the rebellion against typical standards of female beauty by means of head-shaving and other avant-

garde hairstyles. The punk fashion of wearing bondage-inspired outfits in public streets or clubs is also good example of sexuality-out-of-place, while accessories made from humble everyday objects like safety pins and shirts made from lint played with disgust in associations with poverty, dirt and filth.

In a similar fashion to Habermas, Warner conceives of publics as virtual effects of discourse rather than concrete members of an audience. Just as Habermas claims that publics are in principle inclusive as their membership cannot be limited beforehand, Warner claims that a public is a "special kind of virtual social object, enabling a special mode of address," and that "it is modeled on a reading public."[24] One trait of a public is that one becomes a part of it through mere attention. In this respect, a flash mob public could include anyone who happens to encounter a flash mob video, website, or Facebook page, or someone who unexpectedly witnesses the event first hand. In another sense, flash mobs imply a type of publicness that comes forth in the mob itself. Rather than simply being a cultural object or spectacle that produces a public outside of itself in the form of an audience, flash mobs constitute a public among their members in the moment of their occurrence. Participants are not a group of performers known to one another beforehand but are themselves strangers coming together to interact, be together, and form a collective entity. The medium of exchange is not reasoned discussion, but primarily based in shared body movements, closeness, and synchrony.

Previously, I described Facebook as a pseudo-public sphere where rational-critical debate is mostly absent or trumped by the swapping of consumer preferences and an emphasis on maintaining affective links between friends. Since Warner's counterpublics make room for expressive and affective levels of language, in some contexts, the

predominant communications found on social networking sites and the manifestation of these links in flash mob events could be understood more positively as a space of "poetic world-making."[25] However, there are some important differences between flash mobs and the examples given by Warner that should be kept in mind. First, the publicity enacted by flash mobs does not trigger strong emotional reactions on par with those seen in response to feminist, queer, or transgender subversions of bodily conventions. While flash mobs may amuse, surprise, and irritate, they do not provoke the repressed traumas of sexual difference. Secondly, counterpublics based on sexual and gender difference make room for expressive elements of language with a broader aim in mind. The transformation of publicness is part of working towards an end to gender oppression and exploitation in both private and public spaces. In contrast, flash mobs strive for inarticulateness and irrationality as ends in themselves.[26] If flash mobs are spaces of poetic world making, then what kind of public is being built? What is at stake in these publics and how are the stakes decided? In asking these questions we return to the inscrutable nature of flash mobs that Tom Vanderbilt argues is their most subversive trait.

III - Virtuous Irrationality: Flash Mobs as the Public-Supposed-to-Not-Believe

The attempt to escape rationality that is expressed in flash mob performances might be better understood not as producing a counterpublic space at tension with a larger public, but rather as a collapse of belief in the relation of bourgeois publicity to meaningful political process. In her book *Publicity's Secret*, Jodi Dean argues that from its inception the public sphere has been predicated on a necessary gap in knowledge that she refers to as "the secret."[27] She writes: "The ideal of a public typically posited in Enlightenment-

based theories of democracy relies on the secret as its disavowed basis. The secret, in other words, is the fundamental limit point of democratic validity."[28] Like Warner, Dean critiques the idea of publicity for being exclusive, though she does not do this from a feminist or gay perspective. She argues that a split between those who are "supposed-to-know" and those "supposed-to-believe" was constitutive of publicity from the start. Dean draws on the writing of Jeremy Bentham who posited this split public as a justification for a system of publicity where access to information is held up as the key to democracy.[29] According to Bentham, she tells us, the majority of the public does not have the time or ability to adequately judge political matters. There is no need to worry that this public will consequently make poor decisions, however, since they produce their judgments by relying on a smaller group of supposedly informed, rational thinkers who they believe have access to the facts. The public-supposed-to-believe forms its opinions based on the expert ideas of a public-supposed-to-know. The only thing standing in the way of competent decisions is therefore what she calls the secret – a lack of total and true information for the public-supposed-to-know to base their judgments on. It is here that the secret is posited as the limit to democratic publicity that masks the split nature of the public and the inequality that it implies.

Dean describes how this system of publicity has resulted in suspicious subjectivities. She reverses the emphasis that Habermas places on the communication of private subjectivity outwards to a public sphere as based in free interiority and self-clarity. Dean describes the need for transparency of self in the public sphere as an invasive demand produced by publicity as a system of distrust. She writes: "the subject's orientation to an audience suggests less a reasoning subject than one deeply bound to the opinions of

others. The subject in need of transparency is compelled to create and present itself before a judging and normalizing audience of others."[30] For Habermas, there is never any doubt about the rightness of public judgment because it is based in reason and social deliberation as opposed to arbitrarily imposed authority. Dean questions Habermas' assumption that the public has a right to know by associating the presumed rationality of the public with a hidden foundation in bourgeois moral authority. She implies that the need for disclosure is less about free will and rationality than about a coercive conformity. Contemporary information technologies aggravate this suspicious mindset further since they hold the promise of unlimited access to the facts. In Dean's view, the information age is the new hegemony, and the public sphere is the ideology by which democratic practices are undermined in favour of the consumption of ever more information.[31]

Dean critiques Habermas for falling into a similar trap as Bentham when he opposes a consumer-based publicity to a critical publicity. For Habermas, consumer-oriented publicity is based in secrecy rather than transparency. The information produced for consumption is managed by private companies who disguise their true interests through public relations strategies. The solution for combating public relations is to strive for more and better information. Dean counters that the problem of publicity today is one of belief rather than knowledge. She writes:

> the collapse of this belief [in the public-supposed-to-know] is what's at stake in contemporary technoculture and displaced from the analysis through Habermas's equating of publicity and reason. The endless exposure of ever more secrets, the continued circulation of critical reflection, hails each as an expert entitled to know even as it undermines any sense that anyone knows anything at all. Precisely because each is an expert, no one believes in the expert opinion of anyone else.[32]

If the problem is one of belief, then the demand for more information simply reproduces the system of suspicion and distrust. Although belief has collapsed, the ideology of the critical public sphere as the basis of a functioning democracy maintains a stronger hold on us than ever. Citing Žižek, Dean explains that "an ideological identification exerts a hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it."[33] The critique of media manipulation that we are all familiar with strengthens our sense that we know better than others, who do believe, and that we ourselves will not be fooled. At the same time, regardless of our skepticism, belief continues to be materialized through practice. The technologies we use and the media we consume believe for us so that we don't have to.

The tendency to actively avoid meaning that is expressed in flash mobs reflects this loss of trust in the value of critical publicity. A flash mobber quoted in Thomas Marchbank's article clearly reveals a cynicism in relation to the press when he states: "Possibility is ours to create. Reality is the impediment of the unimaginative. It's them [journalists] stuck in the network of needing to organize, label, categorize, ANALyse."[34] This quote expresses Dean's point perfectly. The flash mobber is able to sustain his or her position as the public-supposed-to-not-believe by positing the continued existence of a subject-supposed-to-believe, in this case, journalists and onlookers. The journalists believe for them so that they don't have to. In Dean's view, this collapse of belief has resulted in a depoliticizing cynicism that holds antagonisms and genuine political action at bay. "The public sphere," she writes, "rests on the constitutive impossibility of a politics without, outside of, beyond, power, a politics in which decision is postponed in favor of a consensus that has always been already achieved."[35] In the remainder of this

chapter I will turn to the question of how a collapse of belief is influencing models of political action. But first I will turn to a concrete example.

In the first chapter I analyzed a flash mob video representing a flash mob rave in a university library in relation to spectatorship. I will turn again briefly to the UNC Chapel Hill rave as a useful illustration of the flash mob as a public-supposed-to-not-believe. In this flash mob, students converged in the lobby of their library, danced for eight minutes, and then dispersed. The video tells us that it took place during exam period, as students were seeking release from the stress of their studies. In this video the library staff and security are presented as authority figures who are powerless to stop the dancing and rowdiness. A contrast is being set up between, on the one hand, rationality, knowledge, work and authority, as represented by the library and its staff, and on the other, the freedom of bodily movement through dance, of letting loose through nonsensical disruption. What is striking is how the students eventually break into a spontaneous school sports chant at the end of their performance, thereby reasserting their identification with the school and inscribing their actions as a claim of possession over the institution. We could read this performance as simultaneously an expression of entitlement to the space and a rejection of the expert knowledge promised by the library's holdings. In this performance the library as an institution believes in knowledge and expertise so that the students don't have to. While the library is provided as a service to them and the rules exist to enable them to use the space effectively, the students, through their actions, perceive this structure as an unnecessary imposition. In a society in which we are each already hailed as experts by the media, the work of studying becomes a redundant exercise that couldn't possibly tell us anything we don't already know. While

the students may acquire some useful information they are ideologically confident in their knowledge about how the university really works – an exchange of money for a certificate and the promise of class privilege. The students make sure that they do not disrupt the space for long so that they can return to going through the motions of studying. The singing of the school chant ensures that the action is not mistakenly read as a challenge to the structure of the university. Rather than genuinely disrupting the educational process, the students are showing their allegiance, or at least the fact that they are in on the joke. In this case the joke is not the flash mob prank, but the consumer-oriented university system.

I do not mean to argue that the cynical ideology I see in the above example is true for all flash mobs or for all students at UNC Chapel Hill. The group Newmindspace, for example, is much more earnest in its self-conception. In contrast to many other flash mobs, Newmindspace claims that it aims to create community and reclaim public space. In their emphasis on a meaningful sociality they may be an exception to the general tendency of flash mobs. The main point I wish to emphasize is the fact that by fetishizing irrationality as the rallying call that draws people together to form a public, flash mobs inadvertently reinforce the ideology of the public sphere that Dean criticizes. Despite appearances, flash mobs defer agonistic political action in favour of consensual participation. They express the active non-involvement of participants in political life.

IV - Publics and Agency

Both Warner and Dean argue that publics do not act. This is because publics are not identical to concrete individuals but rather effects of discourse. Warner argues that

publics are often ascribed agency because in traditional thinking about the public sphere face-to-face dialogical interaction is idealized and therefore associated with individuals who can make decisions and act.[36] He writes:

> It's difficult to imagine the modern world without the ability to attribute agency to publics, though doing so is an extraordinary fiction. It requires us, for example, to understand the ongoing circulatory time of a public discourse as though it were discussion leading up to a decision.[37]

He argues that publics, unlike mobs or crowds, are incapable of any activity that can't be expressed through the kinds of verbs that we normally use to describe the private activity of reading: scrutinize, opine, ask, reject, decide, judge, etc. The agency of publics is only realized when institutionalized forms of power, such as the state, act in the name of the public. In this regard, Warner differentiates counterpublics from publics in general. Since counterpublics mark themselves off from a general or dominant public and eschew rational-critical debate in favour of the expressive dimensions of language, they have more difficulty transposing themselves to the generality of the state.[38] Though counterpublics do not have agency in the same way as voluntary associations, they transform the world by producing new forms of embodied sociability among strangers. Flash mobs appear to be an instance of a new form of sociability among strangers. However, once participants converge they become a crowd that has agency. In their expression of agency and simultaneous refusal of meaningful action flash mobs represent the ambiguity of counterpublics in relation to social change. As scenes of social transformation that do not directly act through state mechanisms, counterpublics overlap in some ways with the forms of non-hegemonic political practice that have gained popularity in recent years. In the following section I explore how flash mobs act according to a similar logic as more overtly politicized groups like Reclaim the Streets.

Non-Hegemonic Political Practice

Reclaim the Streets began in late-nineties Britain and quickly inspired other groups to form in cities across North America and Europe. Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is a type of direct action where people take over a city street for a few hours to dance, socialize and express their rights of use to their neighbourhood spaces. RTS explicitly state their anti-capitalist and anti-car politics on their website describing themselves as "a direct action network for global and local social-ecological revolution(s) to transcend hierarchical and authoritarian society (capitalism included), and still be home in time for tea".[39] The differences between RTS and flash mobs are fairly obvious and in making a comparison I don't wish to collapse these distinct practices. Whereas RTS clearly define their actions in relation to an anarchist political movement, flash mobbers, when pressed to define their actions, assert that they are meaningless and avoid making political statements. Another significant difference is that RTS parties attempt to disrupt traffic and commercial activity while flash mobs only disrupt the city on a symbolic level. Flash mobs are short in duration, take place on sidewalks, squares or other areas where traffic will not be blocked, and aim to surprise people more than challenge their ideological preconceptions. Rather than disrupt the daily flow of commerce and automobiles, a group of a few hundred people will "opt-out" of consumption-based forms of amusement and reject automotive transportation in favour of public transit. Flash mob events only slightly alter the atmosphere of the city and otherwise do not interfere with its daily rhythms. While they do not ask permission for their events, the flash mob organizers have not suffered the same police repression that RTS parties have in the past, and have

in fact received positive press coverage in contrast to the images of violence disseminated by the media in relation to more politicized demonstrations.[40]

Despite these differences, both RTS and flash mobs share a logic of action based in non-hegemonic tactics and everyday life as a field of transformation. I will rely on Richard Day's article "From Hegemony to Affinity: The Political Logic of the Newest Social Movements," to define non-hegemonic political action.[41] Day argues that the paradigms for understanding radical social transformation that focus on the relation of antagonistic groups to a hegemonic centre are no longer helpful for describing the political logic of the contemporary anti-globalization movements. He argues that these movements are driven by a logic of affinity and are critical of the "hegemony of hegemony" within revolutionary discourse. Hegemony is typically understood as the process in which the particular interests of the ruling class become naturalized as universal interests through a mixture of both consensual and coercive methods. For orthodox Marxists, hegemonic struggle is always class based and organized around a unitary centre of power, the state, and its eventual overcoming. Day describes the shift in the way that hegemony is conceived in the writings of Lenin and Gramsci to the post-Marxist theory of hegemony proposed by Laclau and Mouffe.[42] While the first notion focuses on the revolutionary attempt to occupy a unitary hegemonic centre by a classed subject and is, according to him, totalizing in its intent, the second moves towards the idea of a multiplicity of struggles and partial reforms over time. Day describes the consequences of this second approach to political practice as follows:

> rather than seeking state power, subordinated groups began to focus more on persuading an existing hegemonic formation to alter the operation of certain institutions, or infiltrating those institutions with a different set of values and thereby constructing a counter-hegemony.[43]

According to Day, the problem with this approach to social change, which he associates with a "politics of the demand," is that when structures of discipline and control are appealed to for emancipation, the very demand reinforces the legitimacy of these same dominating structures. The politics of the demand is therefore driven by an ethics of desire "in that it seeks primarily to reproduce the conditions of its own emergence."[44] Partial victories are sometimes achieved, but overall the intensity and amount of discipline and control in society is increased.

Day believes that the general tendencies displayed in the politics of the anti-globalization movement do not follow this pattern of the politics of demand. He draws on the ideas of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to describe some of the features of these non-hegemonic approaches to social change. Their definition of the multitude involves resistance, insurrection, and constituent power, which they describe as "micropolitical practices of insubordination and sabotage, collective instances of revolt, and finally utopian and alternative projects."[45] Day associates these practices with what he defines as a "politics of the act." Rather than appeal to a hegemonic centre to achieve changes in society, many contemporary political practices focus on direct action and the creation of alternative institutions in the present. Through these non-hegemonic tactics they seek to limit the reach of corporate and state power and to render current dominant institutions redundant. Examples of this range from the World Social Forum, which seeks to delegitimize the World Economic Forum rather than attempt to alter it through persuasion or coercion, to the direct action tactics of RTS, who see the occupation of public streets as an end in itself. According to Day, a politics of the act does not appeal to a hegemonic centre, but breaks the loop of desire for emancipation by precluding the necessity of the

demand.[46] Two important aspects of an affinity-based approach to social transformation are the consistency of means with ends in political struggle, and also an aversion to the logic of hegemony. Day argues that for the newest social movements "the goal is not to create a new power around a hegemonic centre, but to challenge, disrupt and disorient the processes of global hegemony, to *refuse, rather than rearticulate* those forces that are tending towards the universalization of the liberal-capitalist ecumene."[47]

RTS as a "politics of the act" does not ask permission from the city to hold their parties and does not work towards changing laws so that the lifestyle they espouse becomes sanctified by the state. Flash mob events can appear very similar to RTS-style political action in the sense that despite the political discourse of the latter the events themselves seem to be without explicit purpose. The metro parties and silent raves organized as flash mobs entail the same actions as those of RTS except for the fact that the flash mobs are less disruptive of the spaces they appropriate. Participants are not demanding anything but are simply enjoying the event that they are producing. This sense of spontaneous action for its own sake that both exude is what Tom Vanderbilt picks up on as the subversive aspect of the flash mob.

I think that Day's concept of the politics of the act is insightful for understanding the tactics of activists today. However, he leaves many questions unanswered about the potential for a non-hegemonic social transformation. Day argues that what he refers to as non-hegemonic politics bypasses the choice between reform and revolution. Despite their orientation away from the state, do the direct action practices that he describes not weigh very heavily on the side of slow evolutionary transformation, and hence reform? It should also be mentioned that these gradual attempts at transformation must deal with the

repressive tactics of the neoliberal state. While they do not appeal to the state for emancipation, this does not prohibit it from intervening in projects that it considers a threat to its own hegemony. With these constraints in mind it is difficult to see how a radical social transformation that is either national or global in reach could emerge from these necessarily local, partial, and often temporary anti-hegemonic practices. In order to have an effect on macrostructures such as capitalist economic relations or global problems like climate change, non-hegemonic movements would need to increase in size, convincing more and more people to adopt similar alternative practices. At a certain level a constituent politics must persuade and influence growing amounts of people to take part in alternative economic and social institutions while simultaneously protecting its links and spaces from state repression. While a politics of the act does not give legitimacy to current institutions in the same way as a politics of the demand, it seems to lead to similar results, that is, partial victories along with increased state repression.

Flash Mobs and the Contradictions of the Everyday

The politicization of everyday life is another aspect of Reclaim The Streets practices that resonates with flash mobs. Henri Lefebvre first defined the everyday as a site of political transformation in his *Critique of Everyday Life*.[48] Everyday life is comprised of the daily routines and rhythms of small necessary tasks, as well as routinized pleasures related to leisure activities and holidays. For Lefebvre, the everyday is a sphere that represents the totality of human activities, or the relations between all the various spheres of social life. In "Lefebvre's Dialectics of Everyday Life," Ben Highmore writes: "everyday life is a challenge to general social atomization: a separation of society and

experience into discrete realms of the political, the aesthetic, the sexual, the economic and so on; of life divided into labour, love, leisure, etc."[49] Within capitalist society, everyday life exists in an alienated state but nevertheless contains the possibility of its own critique through moments of intense experience or festival. Because it represents the interrelations of all of the spheres of social life that have been fragmented by capital, the transformation of everyday life is necessary for any revolutionary project. Highmore notes that "the possibility of transforming society via independent economic and political solutions is, for Lefebvre, not just a mistake, but a fundamental misunderstanding of the revolutionary project."[50] For RTS, the streets in particular hold the promise of festivity breaking through the repetitions of daily routines. The RTS website proclaims: "Ultimately it is in the streets that power must be dissolved: for the streets where daily life is endured, suffered and eroded, and where power is confronted and fought, must be turned into the domain where daily life is enjoyed, created and nourished".[51]

Carnivalesque moments emerge out of the fabric of everyday life in the form of festivals and revolutionary situations. Through the temporary overturning of established hierarchies, these moments of excessive expenditure allow us a small glimpse of a world that is not dominated by capital. Highmore points out that the radical potential of such moments has been critiqued as being a safely valve that allows subordinated groups to let off steam but that consequently helps to maintain current systems of domination. He argues that this does not actually pose a problem for Lefebvre since he is not concerned with the effective radicality of carnival but sees it only as a sign of the potential for the alteration of everyday life. He argues instead that "the transformation of everyday life

can only be accomplished when the festival is no longer a 'few dazzling moments' but has penetrated life and transformed it."[52]

Everyday life is the field in which flash mobs operate. The events are planned to irrupt at precisely those moments when nothing remarkable is happening. The normal routines of movement and behaviour in any particular spot serve as a foil for the unexpected transgression of spatial codes by the flash mobbers. To describe these events as moments of festival, however, may be going too far. While certainly the participants experience a momentary thrill from performing their antics flash mobs come across as very controlled events with limited possibilities for the freedom of action that festival implies. The short duration of the actions, their scripted nature, and the need for conformity amongst participants in order to produce the proper effect, results in a spectacle that doesn't provide a space of release on a par with a carnivalesque atmosphere. The flash mob, despite appearances of spontaneity and silliness, actually limits the freedom of the participants who must perform a role and conform to flash crowd behaviour. In this regard, flash mobs could be understood as an escape from the demands of self-expression.

A comparison of flash mobs to events such as the Carnival Against Capitalism makes the highly controlled nature of flash mobs more obvious. The Carnival Against Capitalism that took place on June 18, 1998, is an example of an irruption of festival that opened up a space of possibility for many future global protests that were to follow. As one of the earliest, large-scale anti-globalization protests, the Carnival Against Capitalism was organized to coincide with the meeting of G8 leaders in Köln, Germany, and resulted in a variety of protest actions and "reclaim-the-streets" parties in 43 different countries.[53]

The initial concept for the carnival was created by the original Reclaim the Streets group in London, where on that day an estimated 5000 to 10,000 demonstrators, donning different coloured carnival masks, took over the financial district. A variety of events turned the city upside down for a day as traffic was blocked by Critical Mass Bike Rides, Die-Ins, sizeable marches, and people dancing in the streets. The lower floor of the Cannon Bridge Building was trashed as protesters attempted to take over the London International Financial Futures Exchange. Simultaneously, a fire hydrant was set off and a brick wall was built by protesters to block off the entrance. Sound systems were also set up as punk bands played in the street. In "Dancing On The Edge Of Chaos," Wat Tyler describes the situation in London as follows:

> The city had been declared off-limits. Bridges closed to traffic, trains not stopping. A group of a few hundred had gathered outside the Stock Exchange, using steel crowd control barriers to ram reinforced glass doors. It was like this everywhere. Sounds of breaking glass harmonized with the sounds of celebration. Passion for change mixed with frustration and anger against the present system. Some are content to dance. Some take it further. Everyone expresses themselves differently. Unplanned and unexpected, carnival finds its own voice.[54]

Global days of action such as J18 (all such days became referred to by the abbreviated form of their calendar date) correspond fairly well to what a modern day festival might look like. After long periods of build up and planning, the days of action occur in relation to the cyclical meetings of world leaders and economic organizations. On the more "successful" days of protest the normal functioning of the city is stopped or significantly affected as traffic is blocked, consumption is curtailed, websites are 'occupied' and financial institutions shut down. No amount of planning can control or predict what will happen on the day as multiple small groups converge with their own plans and spontaneous actions occur as the situation unfolds. There are abundant

examples of the playful and festive nature of many of the participants' actions, as homemade costumes are commonly worn and puppets constructed. Chanting, dancing, drumming and singing occur as free food is distributed and music played. Along with these festive activities, property is sometimes destroyed as the space of the law is temporarily suspended.

Despite the fact that the Carnival Against Capitalism sought to challenge the legitimacy of capitalism and the state, it did not appeal to leaders to make changes. J18 was followed by increased forms of repression as the city returned to its 'normal' functioning. The financial district in London is referred to as a 'ring of steel' by Tyler, who describes the roadblocks, police checkpoints, and CCTV surveillance cameras that tightly control the area. It is here that the J18 revelers converged in 1998 and have not been able to return to since. Five thousand hours of footage from the CCTV cameras was scrutinized by the police, resulting in the identification of 138 people. Their photos were subsequently distributed throughout the country. Tyler mentions that one man was even tracked down by a DNA analysis of the blood he left on a police van.[55]

What this example illustrates is the comparative lack of festivity that arises during flash mobs. As I argued earlier in my analysis of the library rave, flash mobs often reinforce dominant ideologies rather than question them. Hierarchies are not overturned, and the everyday flows of the city are not suspended in such an extreme degree. The domain of everyday life is a site of political struggle, but that does not mean that disruptive activites, however positive and festive, are inherently radical.

From Flash Mobs to Real Mobs in the World of Neoliberal Hegemony

In this final section I want to explore the question of how the collapse of belief in the public-supposed-to-know that is theorized by Dean has influenced the shift in radical practice towards a politics of the act. The suspicious subjectivities that arise with the public sphere and that Dean associates with a cynicism towards the knowledge of others may also have contributed to a distrust of radical political prescriptions as well. The turn away from the "hegemony of hegemony" that Day advocates could be seen as a symptom of a crisis on the left where it has become taboo to organize under a unifying platform towards a shared vision of a socialist society. Effectively, the "movement of the movements" logic of affinity entails a refusal of totalizing discourses. The politics of the act espoused by RTS bears some similarities to Warner's counterpublics in that neither wants to transpose their politics to the level of the state. Social change is imagined as taking place on a dispersed, autonomous, and micropolitical level. This means that political action is most often limited to local, issue-oriented and temporary anti-hegemonic practices.

In contrast to the public sphere ideology that Dean criticizes, non-hegemonic practice at least encourages political action in place of the ironic consumption of information. Recall Dean's argument that "the presumed value of information – the public must know – morphs political action into compliant practices of consumption: good citizens must have magazines, televisions, Internet access."[56] I would like to complicate this slightly by extending Dean's argument to include practices that go beyond mere consumption. I would argue that in the age of Internet technology participation has become a dominant feature of the ideology of citizenship. Participation can include posting comments on

web pages, signing email petitions, joining Facebook groups, posting videos to YouTube, Blogging, and even taking part in a flash mob. Participation, in contrast to action, is convenient and lacks a sense of risk and commitment. These online methods of participation provide people with ways of feeling engaged without actually having to take part in political struggle.

Understanding flash mobs as subversive is overly optimistic and involves confusing participation with action. The touting of irrationality on the part of flash mobbers does little more than activate people to become involved in events that reinforce the cynicism of the current ideological matrix we find ourselves in. The temptation to read a subversive quality into flash mobs is a sign of the extent of this participatory complex, where collective action becomes completely uncoupled from rational-critical debate. The result is the flash mob, a performance that does not so much subvert the dominant forces of neoliberal societies but represents the lack of ability or will to define a political project. The quandary of the flash mob is reflected in the Parisian riots of 2005 when marginalized immigrants took to the streets to burn and damage the property of their own neighbourhoods. The puzzling thing about this event, which commentators tried to understand, was that no demands were made by the rioters. Slavoj Žižek described the riots as a "'zero level' protest, a violent protest act which 'wants nothing.'"[57] What was troubling about this revolt was the inability on the part of the protestors to articulate specific political demands, let alone a meaningful utopian project. Rather than try to impose a politics on the outburst from the outside, for example, by pointing to the marginal socio-economic status of the protestors, Žižek claims that we should recognize the riots as a demand for visibility. He writes:

> Analysts were searching for the meaning behind the violence, missing the obvious, i.e. that, as Marshall McLuhan would have put it, the medium itself was the message: we were dealing with the case of what long ago, Roman Jakobson called 'phatic communication,' in which the meaning of the act is the act of communication as such, establishing a link, creating the visibility of the speaker.[58]

This desperate need for visibility was not about the recognition of some ethnic or religious difference, but a desire to be seen as a part of the whole of French society. Žižek reads the revolts as a symptom of the worldless nature of global capitalism that deprives people of any meaningful cognitive mapping. "The injunction," he writes, "the 'ideological interpellation' proper to global capitalism is no longer that of the sacrificial devotion to a Cause, but, in contrast to previous modes of ideological interpellation, the reference to an obscure Unnameable: ENJOY!"[59] It is the inscrutable nature of this command that causes anxiety. The injunction to enjoy that Žižek describes results not in a sense of freedom or pleasure, but the anxiety of a person who is forced to make a choice without understanding the consequences of that choice. The situation under capitalism is one in which we must constantly decide how to live without any reassurance that anyone knows what the right choice is.[60] We can relate this lack of cognitive mapping, or sense of truth, with the collapse of belief that Dean describes. While I don't mean to compare the marginal status of the Parisian rioters with the relatively privileged participants of flash mobs, I believe they reflect a similar dynamic. What both the Parisian riots and flash mobs bear witness to is this radical undecidability that we are increasingly faced with in our everyday lives. The refusal to make a political decision is not subversive, as Vanderbilt presumes, but ends up reproducing the same command: ENJOY! BE SILLY! JOIN THE FLASH MOB!

While arguing that flash mobs are highly mediated by new communication technologies I have attempted to counter discourses that assume the democratizing affects of these technologies. Being an active spectator, consumer, or producer of web content is not necessarily a challenge to dominant forces and in fact, in late capitalism, is the very means by which power relations are produced and reproduced. I have considered this from the perspective of biopower in relation to social networking sites, as well as perspectives informed by psychoanalysis that explore the function of subjective enjoyment in social and cultural formation. Lefebvre's theory of social space, likewise, allows for an understanding of the determinations of social practice from a Marxist perspective that examines social space as part of the development of capitalist social relations. The privileging of participation in "networked" society functions to placate feelings of alienation while displacing political struggle. Flash mobs are a cultural expression of this fetishizing of pure participation removed from any meaningful political project. Hopes that flash mobs might represent a future form of political organization reflect a desire for a politics of convenience where getting together with others is easy and does not involve conflict, commitment, and struggle. Since the organizational form of flash mobs is based in stranger relations, the possibility for it to result in politically poignant events depends on the general level of consciousness in society.

Notes

[1] James Crabtree, "It's Time to Get Flash," *New Statesman*, September 15, 2003, 12-13.

[2] Judith A. Nicholson, "Flash! Mobs in the Age of Mobile Connectivity," *Fibreculture: Internet Theory, Criticism, Research* 6 (2005): unpaginated.

[3] Nicholson acknowledges this fact at the beginning of her essay and does not provide a single example of a flash mob that has utilized cell phones in order to organize. It is therefore not clear why she insists on framing her analysis of flash mobs through an association with cell phone mobilization.

[4] Tom Vanderbilt, "On New-Model Flash Mobs," *Artforum* 42:10 (Summer 2004): 71, 74. Similar arguments can be found in Carl Solander, "Placing Virtuality: Flash Mobs, Electronic Disturbance, and the War of the Worlds," *Thresholds* 29 (Winter 2005): 11-15; Bill Wasik, "My Crowd: Or, Phase 5: A Report From the Inventor of the Flash Mob," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2006, 56-66; Xavier González, "Urbanity and Sociability: Scenes and Transformations," *A+T* 27 (Spring 2006): 4-11; and John Saunders, "Flash Mobs," in *Acts of Citizenship*, eds. Engin F. Isen and Greg M. Nielsen, 295-296 (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008).

[5] Slavoj Žižek discusses flash mobs directly in the following passage: "Is not the 'postmodern' politics of resistance precisely permeated with aesthetic phenomena, from body piercing and cross-dressing to public spectacles? Does not the curious phenomenon of 'flash mobs' represent aesthetico-political protest at its purest, reduced to its minimal frame? In flash mobs, people show up at an assigned place at a certain time, perform some brief (an usually trivial or ridiculous) acts, and then disperse again – no wonder flash mobs are described as urban poetry with no real purpose. Are these flash mobs not a kind of 'Malevich of politics', the political counterpart to the famous 'black square on white background', the act of marking a minimal difference?" From *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London and New York: Verso, 2004): 124. In this passage Žižek does not sound disparaging of flash mobs and even implies that they open up a space of minimal difference, despite associating them with a postmodern politics of resistance. Regardless of these comments, I argue in the final section of this chapter that flash mobs can better be understood as a symptom of the demand to enjoy that Žižek associates with postmodern capitalist society.

[6] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

[7] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 27.

[8] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 36.

[9] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 37.

[10] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 165.

[11] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 171.

[12] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 189.

[13] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 195.

[14] Darin Barney, "Invasions of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere," in *New Perspectives on the Public-Private Divide,* ed. Law Commission of Canada, 94-122 (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2003): 109-110.

[15] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 161.

[16] See: Chris Soghoian, "Exclusive: The Next Facebook Privacy Scandal," *Cnet News*, January 23, 2008, http://news.cnet.com/8301-13739_3-9854409-46.html (accessed July 23, 2009); "Canadian Commissioner Investigates Facebook Privacy Concerns," *redOrbit*, July 16, 2009, http://www.redorbit.com/news/technology/1722216/canadian_commissioner_investigates_facebook_privacy_concerns/index.html (accessed July 23, 2009); "Facebook needs to improve privacy practices, Investigation finds," *Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada* website, July 16, 2009, http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2009/nr-c_090716_e.cfm (accessed July 23, 2009); and Maggie Shiels, "Facebook 'violates privacy laws'," *BBC News*, May 31, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7428833.stm (accessed July 23, 2009).

[17] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 171.

[18] Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 7:1 (2007): 88-106.

[19] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

[20] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 51.

[21] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 57.

[22] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 57.

[23] For a description of punk style see: Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979).

[24] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 55.

[25] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 114.

[26] Some flash mob participants make this aim of meaninglessness very explicit. An example of this logic is well illustrated by this flash mobber: "The way I see it they can try all they like, as long as we stay meaningless they're stuck with nothing to report. All

the other stuff overseas just serves to confuse the issue. Maybe we should all be militant communists for a day… Possibility is ours to create. Reality is the impediment of the unimaginative. It's them stuck in the network of needing to organize, label, categorize, ANALyse. We have the secret of pronoia [sic] and we will always lead this dance." Quoted from: Thomas Marchbank, "Intense Flows: Flashmobbing, Rush Capital and the Swarming of Space," *Philament* 4 (August 2004): unpaginated. http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue4_Critique_Marchbank.htm (accessed July 4, 2009).

[27] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University, 2002).

[28] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 16.

[29] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 18.

[30] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 33.

[31] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 35.

[32] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 40.

[33] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 38. Quoted from Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997): 21.

[34] Marchbank, "Intense Flows."

[35] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 43.

[36] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 114.

[37] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 123.

[38] Warner, *Counterpublics*, 116.

[39] Reclaim the Streets: http://rts.gn.apc.org/ (viewed July 8, 2009).

[40] For an example of the police response to a Reclaim the Streets event in Toronto on Septembe 26th, 2003 see: Christopher Smith, "Whose Streets?": Notes on Urban Social Movements and the Politicization of Urban (Public?) Space", (Conference talk, The Canadian Association of Cultural Studies 2nd Annual Conference, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, February 2004).

[41] Richard J.F. Day, "From Hegemony to Affinity: the political logic of the newest social movements," *Cultural Studies* 18:5 (September 2004): 716-748.

[42] See: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1985).

[43] Day, "Hegemony to Affinity," 727.

[44] Day, "Hegemony to Affinity," 734.

[45] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2000) cited in Day, "Hegemony to Affinity," 735.

[46] Day, "Hegemony to Affinity," 734.

[47] Day, "Hegemony to Affinity," 730.

[48] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* (1947), trans. John Moore (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

[49] Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 129.

[50] Highmore, *Everyday Life*, 130.

[51] Reclaim the Streets: http://rts.gn.apc.org/ (viewed July 8, 2009).

[52] Highmore, *Everyday Life*, 124.

[53] For general information about the J18 events I am drawing on Katherine Ainger's article "Global Carnival Against Capital" *Z Magazine,* September 1999, and Wat Tyler, "Dancing at the Edge of Chaos: A Spanner in the Works of Global Capitalism," in *We Are Everywhere: The Irrisistable Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, ed. Notes from Nowhere collective (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

[54] Tyler, *We Are Everywhere*, 193.

[55] Tyler, *We Are Everywhere*, 194.

[56] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 35.

[57] Slavoj Žižek, "Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Urban Violence in Paris and New Orleans and Related Matters," in *Urban Politics Now: Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City*, ed. BAVO, 12-29 (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2007).

[58] Žižek, "Urban Violence," 15.

[59] Žižek, “Urban Violence,” 16.

[60] Žižek, “Urban Violence,” 24.

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