

Flash Mob Dance and the Territorialisation of Urban Movement

Georgiana Gore

Blaise Pascal University, Clermont University, georgiana.wierre-gore@univ-bpclermont.fr

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine Flash Mob Dance as a new dance genre, incorporating elements from previous modes of non-institutional theatrical and other forms of performance through online ethnography. Consisting of one-off collective dance events organised in public spaces through mobile phone and internet communication, it effectively reconfigures urban spaces by implementing diverse staging strategies. Through the creation of temporary performance sites, the flow of people and traffic is disrupted, creating potentially new forms of sociality, regardless of whether the performance has political, economic or other objectives.

KEYWORDS: flash mob dance, public space, flow and disruption, spectacle

Introduction

Like rave in the late 1980s, flash mobbing was declared to have been dead and over within the year of it hitting the global scene and making headlines in the international press. Legend now has it that the first flash mob occurred in June 2003, organised (according to his own testimony) by Bill Wasik (2006), senior editor of the American upmarket fashion magazine *Harper's*, and staged onsite by Bill the 'moberator' (Nicholson 2005), presumably one and the same person. Invited by text messages, email and blogging, some hundred people gathered around a \$10,000 carpet in the furnishing department of *Macy's*, a chic New York department store. For ten minutes, they discussed, amongst themselves and with the sales people, purchasing the rug for their free-love commune, to use it as a 'love rug'. And then they dispersed. By thus 'creating a scene' in the dual sense of a drama disrupting the normal flow of activities and a stage (as in the Greek *skena* and the French word *scène*), an event was created.

Although this was not the first apparently spontaneous happening in a public place, since it was reminiscent of yippie¹ prankster action (led by Abbie Hoffman and his collaborators) of the late 1960s and other affiliated performance genres (Molnar 2009; Sawyer 2008), this one-off performance was to serve as the template for further staged

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¹ Yippie is the acronym for Youth International Party, a group of politically active hippies in the USA, who invented playful forms of protest against the Vietnam War.

actions by those who came to be known as ‘flash mobbers’ or ‘mobsters’. Moreover, despite its announced demise, and like all such contemporary rhizomatic forms, flash mobbing has taken root as a mode of public performance or action that transmutes according to its context and *raison d’être*. Unlike sixties’ happenings or eighties’ raves, which occurred in spaces hidden from the public gaze, it has a strong spectacular dimension and explicitly aims to capture public attention. This is especially the case with dance mobs as they are frequently strictly choreographed ensemble performances and sometimes improvised solos, neither of which merges with the urban landscape or townscape bustle. However, unlike conventional street theatre, anyone may join in despite the clear boundary between performer and spectator.

On flash mobbing

Defined since at least 2004, according to Nicholson (2005) and Molnar (2009), in the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, a flash mob is described as ‘a public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse...’, a definition which might possibly account for its first manifestations in 2003. However, since then it has mutated into a multiform performance mode that is impossible to precisely define, and with a history and precedents as elusive and slippery as those of the rave (Gore 1997). Its etymological antecedents may be in the technology journalist and populariser Howard Rheingold’s (2003) idea of the smart mob, a leaderless organisation, or in Larry Niven’s notion of a ‘flash crowd’ that supplied the terminology for massive influxes of net traffic in response, for example, to a website advertisement, announcement or sale. From online research, it is clear that the forms and functions of flash mobbing are as multiple as the groups or communities that appropriate it as a mode of public and spectacular action. Moreover, it is evident today that while for some flash mobbing may be just fun, as a public statement it is rarely if ever ‘pointless’. Whether joining in the mobile clubbing flash mob at Liverpool Street or Paddington stations in London in October or November 2006 to pass the time when waiting for a train or to protest against the British Criminal Justice Act, whether mimicking Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video clip in the streets of Paris, Moscow or Mexico City in 2009 as a tribute to the late star, or whether in July and October of the same year dancing in formation on the steps of Sydney’s Opera House or London’s Jubilee Gardens to protest against climate change, dance through the planned presentation of the self in public spaces certainly has meaning for the participants. As a spectacular intrusion into public spaces designated for other uses, it inevitably makes a point even if the participants are not aiming to do so explicitly which, today, rarely seems to be the case, at least as regards to dance flash mobs or ‘dance mobs’ as they are often called.

While the first events were largely seen as gratuitous acts of fun by participants, press and public alike, according to Nicholson (2005) and Molnar (2009), amongst others – a form of play in Roger Caillois’ (1958) sense of being free, uncertain, unproductive yet regulated and make-believe – more recent staged dance events fall, I would suggest, into three categories defined according to their apparent aims rather than their mode of staging: celebration, political

activism and commercial advertisement.² Despite the differences in their orientation, all may, in certain respects, be viewed as *sales pitches* somewhat like the soap box speeches of the passionate and committed at Speakers Corner in London's Hyde Park, a circumscribed urban space designated for free speech to which, unlike with flash mobbing, the public chooses to come. Etic categorisation being merely a heuristic device, an analysis of any given event often reveals that it may well fall into several categories, as we shall see in the following description of a dance mob, which combines celebration with humanitarian action.

Dance mobbing

Organised in the Louvre, Paris, in 2009 by (and in part with) Paris Opera dancers led by *étoile* (prima ballerina) Marie-Agnès Gillot, this was a fund raising gambit for the children's charity Chain of Hope which aims to provide heart surgery for those unable to afford it. As with most dance mobs, a sound announced the event. A scream rendered the sedate museum atmosphere and strains of the Blue Danube began. Then nine waltzing couples set the scene for three hundred individuals to take to the stage in what is described as a Bollywood style routine to rhythmic pop music (Grappin Schmitt 2010: 10). The spectacle ended with a multitude of ballet shoes inscribed with the charity's web site being strewn across the performing space. As with most contemporary flash mobs, this one was tightly orchestrated both online and offline (Molnar 2009). A few weeks ahead of the date and using Facebook, invitations were sent to dancers giving information about the nature of the event, the dates, times and group numbers for rehearsals at the Opéra's (Garnier) smaller theatre. Also included in the announcement were the kind of dancers and flash mobbers solicited for rehearsals: those who could teach the dance to others. Moreover, two videos of the dance were put on YouTube to give access to the steps to all those who wished to participate. The aim, as stated in the online invitation, was to reproduce 'a simple but coordinated choreography so as to offer a spontaneous and very ephemeral spectacle to those passing by, who may happen to be in the performance space at the time' (Grappin-Schmitt 2010: 10).

Filmed and posted on YouTube, as is customary with flash mobbing, the event was returned to the medium which triggered it, in a circular flow characteristic of much postmodern cultural phenomena. Although this particular event was apparently less reliant on mobile phone communication than is usually the case, it conforms to the logic of such communication, which Nicholson argues is intrinsic to the performance genre and its mode of production:

What was unique about the flash mob was the centrality of a mobile communication technology to the mob, which itself has historically been used as a technology to 'bend' public spaces of significance ... and as a medium or area of exchange for participants (2005).

² Molnar (2009) has identified 5 types of flash mob based either on their form of sociality or their function. They are: 'atomised' flash mobs, interactive flash mobs, performance flash mobs, political flash mobs and advertising flash mobs. It might seem relevant to categorise dance mobs as performance flash mobs but in Molnar's analysis these have an artistic aim which does not seem to be the case with dance mobs, although they do have a strong creative dimension (Tumas-Serna 2004).

The relation between flash mobbing and digital communication technology, much explored in the existing literature, is certainly central to the genre and has enabled its extremely rapid global spread, but it is not the only already-existing material or means by which flash mobbing has fed and which is constitutive of its universal success.

Equally important are its links to all the counter cultural performance modes of the 1960s and 1970s (happenings, street theatre, *prankstering*, the theatrics of the Situationists, performance art and so on) and to the various protest movements of the last century, many of which have used the spectacular to political effect (we should recollect the suffragettes chaining themselves to the railings outside the British Prime Minister's front door to protest in favour of woman's right to vote). Protest movements, moreover, are said to have been the first to use mass mobilisation and more recently mobile communication to create concerted collective action amongst participants, an example being the anti-globalisation movement (Marchbank 2004; Molnar 2009; Nicholson 2005; Shawyer 2008).

Flash mobbing between politics and consumerism

We should be wary, however, of characterising flash mobbing as intrinsically political because of its possible genealogy, as it has been vulnerable to recuperation by consumer capitalism. Examples with quite different aesthetics include the Beyoncé Single Ladies Flash mob professionally performed in London's Piccadilly Circus in April 2009, the carefully staged Glee television series pitch in a Spanish shopping centre in March 2010 and a Belgian television programme's engaging promotional stunt in Antwerp's Central Railway Station in March of the previous year to find an actor to star in the musical *The Sound of Music*. There is no doubt that the mobile, polymorphous, but also participatory character of flash mobbing and its reliance on the technological innovations of consumer capitalism, such as mobile phones, internet and its attendant networking facilities (*Facebook*, *Twitter* and the like) have enabled this recuperation for commercial reasons. There is, however, a dynamic interplay between the appropriation by corporate business of flash mobbing and resistance, through derision and displacement, by popular culture. The T-mobile's television advertisement of the flash mob organised at London's Liverpool Street Station in January 2009 (which apparently won a prize at the Cannes film festival) was a highly choreographed version of earlier less disciplined flash mobs in the same venue much favoured by mobsters. This event became a target for mimicking and less than one month later 12,000 people turned up to reclaim the station for a fun flash mob in which the police rapidly intervened because they perceived dangers of overcrowding. It may be interesting to theorise flash mobs in the light of De Certeau's analysis of everyday practices, as resistances to the latter's conversion into 'totalisations' of rationally ordered and controlled space and time' (Harvey 1989: 214).

Spaces, actors and messages of dance mobbing

As a means of promoting specific political causes or commercial interests, dance mobbing is an effective means on several counts. The very reconfiguration, through the dancing, of the layout of public space forces attention on the performance, thus constituting a hetero-

geneous public into a community with a shared focus – the audience – even if only for the space of a song or two. Indeed, one might say that the audience is a virtual one whose tastes, habits and values are already known since urban spaces are often populated or traversed by identifiable groups. Moreover, shopping centres and squares are already natural stages, often having been modelled following the principles of the Greek or Roman amphitheatre in the case of the former and those of the Renaissance pictorial and theatrical perspective in the case of the latter. The Glee performance by youthful dancers took place on the circular ground floor of a balcony-tiered architectural space in Madrid giving the dancers excellent site lines. The stiletto-heeled hundred single ladies emerged at 9 am on a showery April day on the raised pedestrian area in Picadilly's grand early Victorian neo-classical setting. They removed their coats to reveal body hugging satin leotards and danced to Beyoncé's hit *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*. This short show turned out to be part of *Trident's* campaign to sell tickets to her gig at the O2 venue in the Dome at Greenwich. In the case of these performances, it might even be possible to think of flash mobs as site specific.

A second feature of flash mobbing that impacts the audience is the way in which the human body is more or less conspicuously thrust into the public eye and mobilised as, for example, in advertising. In the case of the single ladies, all hundred were transformed into facsimile Beyoncé's, whose dancing, in the promotional video clip for the song, they emulated. Although always on show in the dancing, the body may be more or less enhanced by costume or other form altering devices which add a further eye-catching dimension. This occurred in the flash mob *Oxfam – Groove your Bump* performed in 2008 on the South Bank of the Thames in London under the auspices of the British charity *Oxfam*. A group of visibly pregnant women emerged from the crowd and in turn started break dancing to draw attention to child birth difficulties and to the lack of care facilities throughout the world. The impact of physically risky dancing is multiplied by the women's visible pregnancy, rendering, despite the modest scale of the event, this flash mob particularly memorable – surely one of the aims of all flash mobbing.

The scale of the event is also a feature that makes a lasting impression, but this has perhaps greater impact on the performers rather than on the audience. One such dance mob was that organised in October 2009 by *Powershift London*, a youth organisation campaigning for climate change and part of an international network. As an end to the conference that they held in London a team of volunteers, most of whom were under the age of twenty-five, organised a flash dance in the Thames South Bank Jubilee Gardens with over one hundred and fifty dancers. We learn from the official *Powershift* posting of the event on You Tube that this was done for various reasons:

Most importantly, we wanted to show how we can communicate our message that climate change can be spoken about in a positive manner by a wider audience, communicate our message that climate change is relevant to all of society and communicate our message that young people from a diverse range of backgrounds can be united on this issue, by doing things like this to inspire us all in a creative, energetic and passionate manner (UKYCC 2009).

This highly ambitious and organised project was modelled on a previous flash mob staged by *Powershift Australia* on the steps of Sydney Opera House. The London event had a full artistic team with a disc jockey, two choreographers, a camera crew and four named dancers, the rest being the conference participants. Rehearsals were held using online material. The dancing in a contemporary style routine gave no indication, however, of the aims of the mob or of their message. While the event certainly questioned the general public as it transformed their experience of walking through Jubilee Gardens, its impact on the participants appears more important through the constitution of community through the dancing action, and the consolidation of their networks.

Dance mobbing aesthetics and experience

From an analysis of some fifty online postings of dance mobs, it is evident that, apart from those sponsored for commercial reasons, which are more akin to a highly groomed and disciplined performance than a mob, the formal aesthetic dimensions of the dance are neither the aim nor the focus for either dancers or spectators. Choreography is either a straightforward collective routine or series of solos, the former requiring no professional technical expertise and both permitting the spectator to enter the dance. This does not imply that there is no aesthetic experience for the spectator, but it is not one in which the dancing must be pleasing to the eye in the conventional sense. That is, it does not play on the pleasure of the visual. Moreover, while the explicit aims are important for the participants, the reasons for the event are not, I suggest, significant for the audience. The impact of the dance resides elsewhere than in relations between form, function or meaning.

Designed to create a visual stir, to intrude into or even disrupt the quotidian, I suggest that the event acts as a marker in several ways. First of all on memory – the novel or unexpected has a particular cognitive impact and is integrated with difficulty into the maps of the mind. Flash mobbing is like soft terrorism, using guerrilla tactics, which explains why it is a good medium for communicating a succinct message, as it is retained because of its difference with the habitual, because it creates a shift in focus. Might we even call flash mobbing a kind of mnemonic system as I earlier hinted?

Secondly, it marks out space and time. It territorialises anonymous spaces of public passage (streets, steps, halls and so on), which belong to no one, giving them new form, function and meaning, while deterritorialising staked out spaces, such as parks, gardens, galleries, shopping malls etc. Moreover, through its intrusion into individual and collective routines, it disrupts schedules and programmes, tearing into time frames, slowing down the speedy and speeding up the slow. Flash mobbing forces a cognitive shift, dislocating and intensifying experience.

Conclusion

This short essay is a modest contribution to the growing literature on popular urban and often global dance genres, which the sociologist Helen Thomas first rendered visible in her 1997 collection *Dance in the City*. It has aimed to identify the main characteristics of what is clearly a new dance genre, which has endured and is growing due to its appropriation by

diverse communities of interest with varying objectives, and due to its extreme adaptability to different contexts of production and performance. Polymorph and polyvalent, flash mobbing may be said to be a truly universal dance form, more flexible and versatile than tango, salsa or flamenco for creating ephemeral identification with communities of interest where the celebratory, political, and commercial become conflated in a mode typical of twenty first century consumer capitalism. Flash mobbing as the transformation of city spaces belongs perhaps to De Certeau's (1988) 'pedestrian rhetoric' of trajectories in that it is constituted of collective popular events that may, however, be appropriated in singular fashion.

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POVZETEK

S pomočjo spletne etnografije v prispevku proučujem *flash mob ples* kot novo zvrst plesa, ki ga sestavljajo stari načini neinstitucionalnih gledaliških in drugih oblik predstav. Tovrsten ples je enkratni kolektivni plesni dogodek, ki je organiziran v javnem prostoru s pomočjo komuniciranja prek mobilnih telefonov in interneta. Te oblike plesa učinkovito preoblikujejo urbani prostor prek izvajanja različnih strategij uprizarjanja. Z oblikovanjem začasnih predstavitenih prostorov sta motena tako tok ljudi kot tudi prometa, ustvarjene pa so možnosti za nove oblike družbenosti ne glede na to, ali imajo te predstave politične, ekonomske ali druge cilje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: flash mob ples, javni prostor, tok in prekinitve, spektakel

CORRESPONDENCE: GEORGIANA GORE, Clermont Université, Université Blaise Pascal, EA 4281 PAEDI, Equipe ExPraCor, UFR STAPS, BP 63172, AUBIERE cedex, France. E-Mail: georgiana.wierre-gore@univ-bpclermont.fr.