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### Glee, Flash Mobs, and the Creation of Heightened Realities

Elizabeth Downey

*Mississippi State University, emd93@msstate.edu*

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*Glee*, Flash Mobs, and the Creation of Heightened Realities

In May of 2009 the television series *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015) made its debut on the Fox network, in the coveted post-*American Idol* (2002-present) timeslot. *Glee* was already facing an uphill battle due to its musical theatre genre; the few attempts at a musical television series in the medium's history, *Cop Rock* (ABC, 1990) and *Viva Laughlin* (CBS, 2007) among them, had been overall failures. Yet *Glee* managed to defeat the odds, earning high ratings in its first two seasons and lasting a total of six. Critics early on attributed *Glee*'s success to the popularity of the Disney Channel's television movie *High School Musical* (2006) and its subsequent sequels, concerts and soundtracks. That alone cannot account for the long-term sensation that *Glee* became, when one acknowledges that *High School Musical* was a stand-alone movie (sequels notwithstanding). It was only due to a unique set of circumstances that *Glee* managed to survive beyond its first thirteen episodes; the show's premiere coincided both with the rise of social media use among its target audience and the corresponding popularity of viral "flash mob" videos on those same social platforms. Flash mobs, specifically those that consisted of spontaneous musical performances in public spaces, brought a sense of *heightened reality*—a surreal, often intensified perspective—into *actual* reality; they created an environment where a musical television series could flourish by removing one of the main obstacles of the musical genre: the implausibility of "bursting into song out of nowhere."

Created by Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, *Glee* is an hour-long comedy that chronicles the struggles and triumphs of the "New Directions," a glee club and show choir from William McKinley High School in fictional Lima, Ohio. Led by idealist Will Schuester (Matthew Morrison), the glee club acts as a stand-in for United States arts education programs in general. Among the obstacles the club faces are decreasing school budgets; disregard for the

importance of the arts in schools; and for the students themselves, the high school hierarchical caste system (in which the glee club, according to cheerleader coach Sue Sylvester [Jane Lynch] in the “Pilot” episode, resides in the “sub-basement”). The show also has dramatic overtones, addressing such issues as teen pregnancy, bullying, homophobia, suicide, mental illness, marriage equality and gender identity. In a broader sense, the show tells the tales of the “outcasts,” those students who do not fit in with the status quo or mainstream student population.

At its heart the show is a musical, and in its first few episodes follows traditional Hollywood musical conventions set out by film and television scholar Jane Feuer. First, the initial focus is on the club, and the musical numbers are in the scope of auditions, rehearsals, and performances at pep rallies and competitions. This fits the Hollywood musical’s tendency to look inward; many if not most movie musicals such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *All That Jazz* (1979), *Fame* (1980), and others are set against the backdrop of the entertainment world, justifying the musical performances (Feuer vii). Also, there are “multiple diegeses,” different yet paralleling narratives that eventually come together in a triumphant, and often romantic ending (Feuer 68). *Glee* introduces these narratives early on; Will’s feud with Sue over the existence of the club carries throughout the series, as do several romantic pairings. Finally, the musical’s purpose is to end with a harmonious binding of conflicting forces in its “drive towards synthesis between fantasy and reality” (Feuer 71, 81).

### **The Non-Illustrious History of the Musical on Series Television**

Prior to *Glee*, the genre of the musical television series had an unfortunate past compared to its self-contained counterparts. One reason may be the configuration of the musical; Feuer’s “drive towards synthesis” lends itself more easily to a stand-alone work. Traditional stage musicals, theatrical films, television movies and live televised musical specials fit this structure

best; while there may be interweaving stories they all come together in a single conclusion, which could be why the aforementioned *High School Musical* was a success. The serialized nature of a regular television show does not generally allow this conclusiveness. Instead it necessitates a continuation of the storyline week in and week out, which could normally risk the impatience of the viewer (Harrison 260). In addition to the limitations that the musical's narrative structure can place upon a television series, the setting itself can be a hindrance. Some of the most notorious musical series failures—*Cop Rock*, *Viva Laughlin*, and *Eli Stone* (ABC, 2008-2009)—had settings antithetical to the traditional musical. Musicals by necessity need a sense of heightened reality to help the viewer accept a musical interlude or suspend disbelief; within the heightened reality of the musical universe, the text, behaviors, and expressions of the characters are all amplified to the point where singing is the only way to convey their true feelings (Deer 3-4). In comparison, the gritty realism of police procedurals, detective stories and legal dramas only serve to highlight the peculiarity of a musical number being inserted into the narrative (Lodge 300).

The few television shows that have successfully pulled off a musical episode all carry an element of heightened reality. The syndicated fantasy series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) was one of the earliest to do a musical episode in 1998, entitled "The Bitter Suite." In it, Xena and her companion Gabrielle fall over a cliff into a world called "Illusia," where everyone communicates in song. Writer/director Joss Whedon would later credit the *Xena* episode as inspiration for the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-2003) musical episode "Once More, With Feeling" which aired in 2001. Rather than the characters entering another realm, the singing is brought to Sunnydale, triggered by the arrival of a demon who causes everyone to sing out their innermost feelings. Among those is the main character of *Buffy*, who

has until the episode silently resented her friends (who mistakenly thought she was in Hell) and their actions that brought her out of a pleasant afterlife (Lodge 295). Both *Xena* and *Buffy* are firmly categorized as Science Fiction/Fantasy series, so the suspension of disbelief required to accept a heightened reality is a given for those genres. A third example is harder to categorize. In 2007, the half-hour medical comedy *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001-2008; ABC, 2009-2010) aired the episode “My Musical.” The plotline, in which a woman collapses in the park and suddenly sees everything as a full-blown musical, was culled from an actual case where an aneurysm patient heard music; this allowed the show to stage a complete musical production at Sacred Heart hospital without abandoning its primary purpose as a medically-based comedy (Lodge 297). Regular viewers of *Scrubs* would not have considered the musical episode outlandish since much of the series, it can be argued, also takes place within a heightened reality; many of the characters display heightened behaviors and expressions that would feel right at home in a musical setting. Yet there is still a solid foundation of medical science, and having the musical play out in the mind of a one-time guest star who has a medical reason for it further rationalizes the premise (Lodge 299-300).

These three particular musical episodes have other commonalities. All three shows share what can be called a camp aesthetic, with a distinct “queering” of their content in the musical episodes. For instance, the romantic ballads are all sung among same-sex pairings; Tara sings “I’m Under Your Spell” to her lesbian partner Willow in *Buffy*, the titular Xena and Gabrielle resolve their conflict in the duet “Hearts Are Hurting,” and *Scrubs* has J.D. and his best friend Turk profess their “bro-mance” in the ode “Guy Love” (Lodge 302). Another commonality which Lodge highlights is that they are all “book musicals,” with their own songs and libretto specifically written for them; while *Xena* and *Buffy* kept their talents in-house, *Scrubs* had the

assistance of Tony-winning *Avenue Q* creators Jeff Marx and Robert Lopez (297-98). Probably most notably all three shows, even within their heightened realities, generated intricate situations in order for their musical installments to happen; even their showrunners (*Xena*'s Rob Tapert, *Buffy*'s Joss Whedon, and *Scrubs*'s Bill Lawrence) believed that in order for someone to burst into song, they would either have to have brain damage, a demonic curse, or exist in an alternate dimension (Lodge 299).

*Glee* does have one distinct element in common with the aforementioned episodes, and that is its camp aesthetic. *Glee* has owned its campiness from the first episode, "Pilot," when the first lines are spoken by openly gay actor Jane Lynch ("You think this is hard? Try being waterboarded, *that's* hard!"), and Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) talks about her gay dads in voiceover. From there however, *Glee* diverges from some of the previously mentioned conventions that supposedly help or hurt a musical series. Serializing, which would normally work against the musical formula's "drive toward synthesis," actually works in *Glee*'s favor. Though there cannot be a definitive romantic conclusion at the end of each episode, there can be a temporary resolution to one or more plotlines expressed in a group musical number. By doing this, the viewer is more tantalized than frustrated to tune in the next week (Harrison 260).

Another convention is that the musical series or episode has to be "book-based" with original music in order to be successful, rather than the "jukebox" method of using existing popular songs, similar to Baz Luhrman's film *Moulin Rouge* (2001). Lodge argues that this method both doomed the *Viva Laughlin* series, as well as a later musical *Xena* episode that adapted the same method (294). *Glee*, however, is perhaps the very definition of the jukebox musical, primarily using existing music to carry the show. Much of the credit for that may be given to *Glee*'s network lead-in, *American Idol*. Since 2002 the reality competition brought audiences fresh faces

performing covers of recognizable songs, week after week. *Glee* very much did the same thing, replacing judges' critiques in between musical numbers with actual story. In a way this mirrors Harrison's argument of how the jukebox method works for *Glee*; the use of familiar songs helps ground the viewer in something they already know and carry nostalgia or sentiment for, and the choir room and auditorium scenes provide a convenient excuse to perform (263-64). Harrison briefly brings up another possible reason for the successful use of familiar music and perhaps a reason for *Glee*'s success overall. He suggests that viewers could be more accepting of the type of "diegetic play" seen on *Glee* thanks to a growing proficiency in the use of social media (Harrison 264). The popularity and use of social media was increasing significantly at the time of *Glee*'s premiere; in 2009 YouTube had 120.8 million viewers in the U.S. alone (Parr), and Twitter had 75 million user accounts by the end of the year, with 20 percent of those considered "high use" (Stein).

There is still the question of the existence of a "heightened reality" in the universe of *Glee*. One could argue that the hormonal hotbed that is high school is in and of itself a heightened reality. Yet in *Glee*'s first three episodes, musical numbers are very clearly delineated into two camps. One is appropriate venues and circumstances for a high school glee club such as auditions, rehearsals, and scheduled public performances. The other is of unmistakable fantasy sequences, in which the performer momentarily steps out of their reality into an imagined performance space, such as when Mercedes Jones (Amber Riley) begins to sing "Bust Your Windows" after throwing a rock through her crush Kurt Hummel's (Chris Colfer) windshield in "Acafellas." This changes in the fourth episode of the first season, "Preggers." The episode barely has *any* singing, save Rachel's audition for the school production of *Cabaret*, but features a non-fantasized dance performance that sharply departs from a standard musical setting and

circumstance. In the main storyline, Kurt gets a spot on the school's football team as a kicker. His condition is that he be able to do the kicks *his* way; by using the famous choreography shown in the Beyoncé music video for "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." Doing this both helps Kurt motivate himself and set proper placement for him to achieve the kick. Kurt further ingratiates himself into the team's good graces by suggesting they use the choreography as a possible "trick play" to rattle the psyche of the opposing team. Later in the episode the game is in progress; the visiting team is ahead 6-0 with only seconds left on the scoreboard, and the game is seemingly over. Kurt's teammate Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith), playing at quarterback, decides to use the play out of desperation. Finn signals a student from the AV club manning the PA system to start playing "Single Ladies," and the players perform the choreographed dance, to the bewilderment of the defense. Then in a sudden move, the center snaps, the play clock restarts, and Finn falls back to pass. He finds his receiver Noah "Puck" Puckerman (Mark Salling), and as the final second begins to tick off, completes the pass to Puck, who runs into the end zone just in time. Even with the clock now at zero, the game is not over until they attempt the PAT ("point after touchdown"). Kurt finally comes into the game, signals the PA system again, and with the backing of Beyoncé, successfully kicks the extra point. Securing the team's first victory of the season, he is hoisted onto the shoulders of his teammates, as his father, Burt Hummel (Mike O'Malley), points and screams from the stands, "That's my son!"

There are two *intended* audiences in this surprise musical display; one is the opposing team, and the performance does its job of being the "element of surprise" needed to distract the defense. The other is a one-man audience, Burt, and this is really known only to his son Kurt (and by extension some of the other glee clubbers), in an attempt to bond with and impress his father. The spectators in the stands, however, are part of the *unintended* audience. They came to



see a football game, not a dance routine, and they seem to be just as baffled as the visiting team upon witnessing the on-field antics, but in the end they celebrate because the home team won. While it is a shock to the opposing team and spectators, the “Single Ladies” performance at the football game is the type of spontaneous public performance that viewers may be familiar with, if they ever received a link to a viral video documenting a “flash mob.” Some of those viewers may have even participated in a flash mob or been in the presence of one. When Harrison speaks of viewer familiarity with new media and acceptance of spontaneous performance, viral flash mobs are likely the type of familiarity to which he is referring; he specifically highlights the “Internet short-form video...which may integrate diverse temporalities and narrative devices within a single piece” (264).

### **Flash Mobs, *Détournement*, and the Defiant Logic of the Musical**

Flash mobs are a way to create a sense of heightened reality into our non-fiction world, and believably introduces that heightened reality into a show like *Glee*. A 21<sup>st</sup> century convergence of performance, public spaces, and modern technology, flash mobs blur the lines of fantasy and reality, and shape an environment in which “bursting into song” is more accepted. It is generally regarded in academia (and by their self-appointed “inventor”) that the first flash mobs were organized in New York City via email by Bill Wasik, then an editor at *Harper’s* (Wasik 57; Molnár; Walker). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “flash mob” as “a large group of people organized by means of the Internet, or mobile phones or other wireless devices, who assemble in public to perform a prearranged action together and then quickly disperse” (OED Online 2015). While the OED definition implies the use of electronic communication as a prerequisite for such a mob to gather, the modern flash mob has many historic precursors. The Italian Futurists of the 1910s sought to break down the invisible wall that stood between artist

and audience, instigating “urban spectacles” to meet the goals of surprise, agitation, chaos, and spectacle (Bowler 782-83). The Futurist movement is cited by many avant-garde groups as the precursor to and originators of modern performance art (Molnár 44). The Dadaists used pranks and mass media to both create and provoke audience reaction, and shared characteristics of simultaneity and anarchy with their flash mob inheritors; Surrealism passed down their tactics of juxtaposition and the element of surprise (Walker 120-22). Situationist International (SI), a movement founded in 1957 with close ties to the Surrealists, placed much emphasis on two concepts vital to the genetics of the modern flash mob. One was *détournement*, translated from the original French as diversion, misappropriation, or hijacking, and used by SI as a method to blur the lines of art, politics, and polite society (Molnár 47). The other is “psychogeography”, which can be interpreted as literally making the city their playground (Walker 124-25). The German *Spassguerilla*, Orange Alternative of Poland, and the Yippies of the U.S. all can both trace their roots to the Futurists, and lay claim as ancestors to the flash mob (Molnár 47).

The flash mobs that Wasik created, however, were not about art, politics, or any other deep meaning; the original intent was as an experiment in “deindividualization,” a state in which group members, seeing that they blend in, allow themselves to join in whatever activity the group is doing, a sort of herd mentality (Wasik 56). Wasik’s “MOB” project was very much about randomness; the activities of his flash mobs ranged from gathering at Macy’s to inquire about the purchase of a “love rug” for a commune (57) to genuflecting at the feet of an animatronic dinosaur at Toys R’ Us on Times Square (59). The target audience that Wasik hoped to exploit was the burgeoning New York hipster scene; he wrote “Not only was the flash mob a vacuous fad; it was, in its very form...intended as a metaphor for the hollow hipster culture that spawned it” (57-58). By 2005 Wasik declared the flash mob “dead,” possibly as a reaction to

commercial interests latching onto the phenomenon and attempting to create it for mass audiences. Ford Motor Company organized a “flash concert” (61) and soon other companies got on board, along with community organizations, university clubs, and improvisation groups. Social media fed the trend also; as videos were posted to YouTube and participants and witnesses tweeted about their experiences, more passive social media users constantly shared these videos across their own networks, quickly making them viral. By the time *Glee* made its debut, flash mobs were popular and numerous, and the stage had been set.

Virág Molnár developed his own typography of flash mobs, after analyzing and indexing over 200 flash mob videos on YouTube. He found that they could be sorted into at least one of five types. *Atomized* flash mobs come closest to the original flash mobs Bill Wasik sparked in his MOB project. These are the so-called “meaningless” flash mobs where a group of people, organized by some type of technology, comes to a place, do an activity, and quickly disperse within a span of minutes. *Interactive* flash mobs seem to be the most popular, in that they garner the most YouTube views and positive feedback. They transpose “play” in an urban space, using childhood games such as tag, capture the flag, and pillow fights, and are similar in spirit to the *détournements* of the Situationists. *Political* flash mobs are more absurdist and guerilla in nature and are intended to send a message. They are a close counterpart to Howard Rheingold’s “smart mobs,” (referenced in relation to “Arab Spring”) and are seen more frequently in Asia and Eastern Europe. *Advertising* flash mobs are what it says on the box...intended as promotion for a product, these are somewhat glossy affairs. Ray-Ban and T-Mobile are just two companies in particular that have utilized this form of guerilla marketing (49-51).

*Performance* flash mobs, the fifth form in Molnár’s typography, are the ones closest to the spirit of *Glee*. These diverge from regular performance art in that they take place in public

spaces with a very large and unsolicited audience, a departure from the more tight-knit and seemingly exclusive artist community. These usually have a specific artistic purpose, whether it be to promote an artist, installation, or exhibition, or to more generally celebrate a community. Often they involve professional groups, such as “Improv Everywhere” or “Flash Mob the World.” (50). An early one that came out shortly before *Glee*’s premiere involved the passengers and workers at the *Antwerpen-Centraal* (Antwerp Central) railway station in Belgium. Over 200 performers danced and lip-synced to “Do Re Mi” from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The Sound of Music*; video of the event went viral and as of April 2015 garnered over 29 million views on YouTube. It turned out that the mob was in fact an advertising stunt to promote a Belgian reality series (so it fits *two* of Molnár’s flash mob types), but it was just one of many flash mob videos that were shared in the period before and during the debut of *Glee* (De Boeck). These are far from meaningless; they gain millions of views, reblogs, email forwards and media coverage; their popularity speaks to their growth as an accepted form of performance.

A performance that aired later in the first season of *Glee* is one that presents most similarly what viewers would recognize as a viral flash mob. In the episode “Dream On” Artie Abrams (Kevin McHale), who uses a wheelchair due to a childhood car accident, confides in his girlfriend Tina Cohen-Chang (Jenna Ushkowitz) that his greatest dream is to dance. Later when they are both at the mall, he imagines telling her that he has regained the ability to walk, rises from his chair, and takes the lead in a fantasy sequence set to the Men Without Hats song “Safety Dance.” Singing the main vocal, he commands a choreographed flash mob in the middle of the Lima Mall. As more and more shoppers and passers-by join the performance, we see changed perspectives in the cinematography via the use of cell phone cameras and other handheld recording devices. In this instance the television viewing audience becomes part of the flash mob

audience; the choice to use the cell phone styled footage takes us into the online viewing experience. What makes the performance even more reminiscent of the real-world flash mobs is that it was actually filmed in an active shopping mall; according to McHale, many shoppers did not know what was happening, since the show had only just started the fall season at the time of filming (MacInnis). At the end of the performance the audience, and Artie, are brought back to the reality of the situation; it was all a dream, and Artie is still paralyzed. However, the reaction of the shoppers who unwittingly walked into an active set was not fantasy, but very much real. In this way the number purposefully mirrors the flash mobs with which viewers are familiar.

### **How Flash Mobs Transform and Heighten Reality**

There are three transformations of one's environment that occur whenever a flash mob takes place. Within these transformations, that sense of "heightened reality" is created, one that is amenable to the types of situations we see in *Glee* and that acclimate audiences to spontaneous performance. The first is *transformation of place*. This transformation ties back to the Dadaist and Situationist movements that aimed to appropriate public spaces as *mise-en-scène* for artistic intent, political protest or cultural commentary. Flash mobs temporarily shake up the well-oiled machine of a constantly moving urban landscape's scenography by disrupting the mechanism of one cog, whether it be the adoption of a commercial space for a non-commercial purpose or vice versa; it temporarily interrupts the regular flow of daily life and after a while, we start to believe that in fact anything can happen (Walker 125; Brejzek 110). In several examples of flash mobs on YouTube, public spaces are appropriated and transformed in this manner; the train station in Antwerp, a public park, a student union, an airport terminal. *Glee*, also, has demonstrated this form of transformational scenography. In the episode "Bad Reputation," Kurt believes that staging a dance number in the school library will give them higher status in the social echelons

of McKinley High School. Libraries have traditionally been considered to be quiet spaces, intended for serious study, research, and reflection. Kurt seemingly knows this, as he specifically states that the worst thing one can do is “cause a disruption in the library... [by] getting your ‘glee’ on in the stacks.” And yet, when his small subgroup of the New Directions performs “U Can’t Touch This” in the library, even dancing on the tables, the librarian does not toss them out, but applauds in delight instead. Perhaps the McKinley school librarian saw a video of one of the many “library flash raves” that were happening at college campuses across the country (Hadro).

Another transformation that occurs during a flash mob is the *transformation of audience*. There is no *one* audience for a flash mob; there are in fact *multiple* audiences. There are the passers-by, shoppers, or other groups of people that just happen to be there, the establishment or “powers-that-be,” whether they be a legal presence or a store manager, the media, the online audience (some of whom are simply clicking a link in a Tweet or Facebook wall post from a friend), and even the mob participants themselves, who watch each other as well as videos after the event (Muse 10-11). The “Single Ladies” and “Safety Dance” performances on *Glee* both illustrate the multiple-audience concept, as does the Antwerp flash mob. The focus in the Antwerp flash mob is not only on the actual performance and performers. There is the establishing shot of convergence and a closing dispersal shot. During the event the cameras cut to passer-by reactions; some gape open-mouthed in shock, while others laugh in delight. Some people take out their phones to record the spectacle. This is part of the flash mob’s appeal to online audiences; the reaction is as much a part of the show as the performance itself. By the end, Wasik’s “joining urge” (58) kicks in and soon watching is not enough for some; they want to jump into the performance. Audience *becomes* performer. Muse states that social media ensures users are always performing; they carefully select the photos, songs, graphics and thoughts that

they want to represent themselves (12). In some cases audience members have multiple personas; one for family and friends on Facebook, another for work colleagues and professional contacts on Twitter or LinkedIn, and yet another for a fandom on Tumblr.

Finally, the third transformation is *transformation of community*. Critics have derided social media and technology as an isolating and separating influence; any public place can be turned into private space as focus is turned to electronic devices, the use of ear pieces divorcing one from face-to-face interaction (Muse 12). The flash mob has turned that concept of technology-as-insulator on its head; it uses the very technology accused of pulling people apart to bring them together in a temporary living breathing community, and eventually a more permanent virtual one (Muse 20). When people Wasik invited to MOB projects asked if they could blog about it, he was resistant at first; after all this was an experiment in joining but also in exclusivity. But seeing as how people share their most personal selves and have a connection with their readers, he saw the benefits of taking these online relationships and manifesting them into a physical form (Wasik 63-64). Most flash mob participants would probably say that socialization and networking were reasons to participate, and that the sociability factor is the greatest deciding factor in whether to join a flash mob (Molnár 48). Existing communities are also shared and strengthened through flash mobs, as members come together to achieve a common goal, or support a fellow community member. In the “Born This Way” episode in season two, Rachel is considering a nose job, which is antithetical to the week’s lesson of self-acceptance and to the dismay of her fellow glee club members. The New Directions, led by Kurt and Puck, organize a flash mob in the Lima Mall as an intervention; the mob is staged similarly to Artie’s “Safety Dance” fantasy but in this case is very real. In this flash mob, there is no singing by any of the New Directions; instead, they play the dance club hit “Barbra Streisand”

(the titular title sharing the name of Rachel's idol) by the group Duck Sauce. The dancing is not as heavily choreographed as that in "Safety Dance," which lends to the scene's realism, and the loose structure enables bystanders to join the other dancers in the performance. By the end there is a burst of applause, and while the television audience does not know what Rachel's decision will be until the final act, the mall audience probably does not even know what the point of the performance was. Yet those audience members in the mall were, for a moment, part of the supportive community Rachel needed.

Another community in *Glee*, the acapella group (and New Directions rival) the Dalton Academy Warblers, also comes together with a common goal of support in a flash mob reminiscent of the many "flash mob wedding proposal" videos on YouTube. In the episode "Silly Love Songs," Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss) enlists his fellow classmates in serenading his crush that works at the local Gap. Dubbing the performance "The Warbler Gap Attack," the group descends on the store and sings the Robin Thicke song "When I Get You Alone," appropriating the commercial space in a manner very similar to the way a Home Depot and an IKEA have been for similar purposes (Stout; IKEA Sunrise). There is also an element of the political, as the number is focused on a boy serenading another boy, still considered groundbreaking in 2011 when this episode aired. The flash mob, however, does not have the desired effect; while the shoppers seem to enjoy the performance, the viewing audience later learns from the object of Blaine's crush that his stunt got him both outed and fired, and that since Blaine is underage they could not legally go out anyway. In this particular example Blaine still has his community to support him after a "failed" flash mob. The New Directions later on have their own failed mob; in the first episode of season three they flash mob the school cafeteria in an effort to recruit new members; instead it ends in a food fight, with the glee club members the



primary targets of the edible projectiles, cementing them as still the losers of the school (“The Purple Piano Project”).

Still, online flash mobs helped “drag the irreverent logic of the musical into everyday experience” for audiences to accept the concept of a show like *Glee* (Muse 14). That acceptance for some audience members evolved to participation; viral flash mobs grew shortly after *Glee*’s premiere episodes, and were even influenced by the very show that had them to thank. One heavily viewed flash mob was created to promote Ohio State University’s student union. As students mill about in the lower atrium, the opening acapella voices in the *Glee* version of “Don’t Stop Believing” ring out in the open space; one male student leaps over another, lands on his feet, and begins pumping his fist to the beat of the music. A small group of male students join him, dancing in a uniform choreographed routine; a similar group of female students takes their place with their own choreography. Scores of fellow Buckeyes come down the dual staircases that lead down to the main atrium and join the throng. The union transforms, and in fact evokes the spirit of the “Born This Way” performance. The online viewing audience is transfixed by the performers but also by the reactions of other students, who become unwitting performers themselves to the online viewers; one female student clings to her phone as she witnesses the dance, looking positively terrified. A YouTube audience could easily mistake what they are watching for an unreleased *Glee* performance, with multiple camera angles, the scarlet and black school colors shared with fictional William McKinley High and the cheerleader uniforms reminiscent of those worn by the show’s “Cheerios.” Finally we see a convergence of the academic and athletic with the artistic; the school’s then-president E. Gordon Gee and the mascot “Brutus the Buckeye” dance through the center of the students as they part. The students turn to face them and do the “O-H-I-O” cheer and arm motion, appealing to the commonality of school

spirit. The performers disperse at the end, while the other students still mill about the mezzanine, presumably hoping for more. In addition to the “official” version released by the university with professional camera work, there is also amateur video taken by passers-by available on YouTube that shows not only a different angle but a different perspective. Five years after it was first posted by Ohio State it had over six million views (TheOhioUnion).

Ohio State was not the first university to use the flash mob as a recruiting or orientation tool, but it was the one to most blatantly use the imagery and music of *Glee* as its inspiration. Others have specifically referenced the show as a muse for their own mobs, such as a foreign language instructor at West Virginia who marketed her department with a group dance to Lady Gaga and Beyoncé’s “Telephone”; convocations and football games have also been taken over by dance mobs and performances (Ensign). Student affairs administrators see the mobs as a way to not only market themselves to future students, but to help new students connect with each other almost instantaneously, meeting one of the most important goals of college orientations: to “build community and pride in place” (Lewin). Students also find the idea of going back to YouTube, to see if they can find themselves in the videos, appealing as well. The transformative elements of the idea of place, of community, of audience member-turned-performer, are all in place. Flash mobs have crossed over into non-college communities also, as professional and amateur-but-well-organized troupes attempt their own. Groups such as Improv Everywhere and Flash Mob the World (which has done annual *Glee*-themed mobs) use their videos to recruit more participants in their flash mobs (Muse 22). Fox Television even piggybacked on the flash mob trend in a much more blatant way by airing a reality show called *Mobbed* (2011-2013). Hosted by Howie Mandel, the hour-long show (which began as a one-off special) took the viewer into the exact planning, choreography, and execution of a flash mob; however, being a

network-sponsored production the mobs were over the top, emotionally manipulated, and ultimately lacking the “purity or fun” of the mob videos viewers were accustomed to on YouTube (VanDerWerff). *Mobbed* and other insider views of “how the sausage is made” may have marked the beginning of the end.

### **The Collapse of the Curtain and the Future of the TV Musical**

Muse predicted in 2010 that eventually the flash mob phenomenon would reach a saturation point; that with time and exposure, audiences would no longer be surprised by flash mobs occurring (Muse 22). The anticipation and expectation of flash mobs is actually reflected in the later episodes of *Glee*; in season four’s episode “Girls (and Boys) on Film,” Blaine (who is now a McKinley student) and fellow glee clubber Brittany S. Pierce (Heather Morris) lead the entire school in a performance of the Isley Brothers’ “Shout,” which travels from the hallways, through classrooms and the library, and ends with applause in the cafeteria where the club was humiliated the season before. By season five the flash mobs seem almost like a regular occurrence at the school; performances of Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” and Billy Joel’s “You May Be Right” in consecutive episodes involve nearly the entire school (“The End of Twerk,” “Movin’ Out”), eliminating the “element of surprise” and possibly the soul of the mob with it (Lewin). By the final season of the series, the creators of *Glee* seemed to wink and nod at the conceit of its own premise. In its second episode “Homecoming,” a supposed flash mob set to “Take On Me” by the 80’s group a-ha is revealed to have been partial fantasy when Sue literally “unplugs” the performance, revealing the cafeteria dance party to instead be a handful of performers among a horde of uninterested students. It renders the flash mob as “blasé” to both the on-screen observers and the viewer, as Muse anticipated (22). Some of the more heightened elements begin to fall away as well; in a genre where feelings are so strong they have to be sung,

one character implores another, “don’t sing it, just say it” (“Transitioning”). In one of its last episodes, “The Rise and Fall of Sue Sylvester,” Sue reveals the possible primary reason she hates the glee club; because she always resented being taken to see old movie musicals as a child. “How do people just burst into song; how does everybody just magically know the lyrics?” she complains, echoing the primary conceit of the musical that has always haunted it. Later she has a confrontation with Will, which is witnessed by current and former members of the glee club who look on in horror. The viewer gets a rare glimpse behind the delusion of the musical; the audience at home sees both Sue and Will’s fantasy (performing “The Final Countdown” in full 80s hair metal costume, with instruments and special effects), and the glee club’s reality (their two teachers playing air guitar on an empty stage in normal street clothes). One whispers, “That can’t *ever* happen to us.” The viewing audience has to wonder if any of it was ever real (the answer is yes, inasmuch as pre-planned flash mobs are “real”). It is perhaps fitting that as flash mobs decreased in popularity, and *Glee* declined in ratings, that by the end of the series performances returned to their traditional venues of the auditorium stage and the choir room. The final episode of the series nods to its inevitable Hollywood musical conclusion with its title, “Dreams Come True.” One of the main couples of the show, Kurt and Blaine, are married and expecting a child, Rachel wins her Tony Award, and McKinley is converted into a performing arts school, eliminating the final conflict and achieving Feuer’s narrative synthesis. In her last lines, Sue says “it takes a lot of bravery to look around you and see the world not as it is, but as it should be,” emulating the “vision of human liberation,” the traditional heightened reality that the musical presents (Feuer 84).

The end of *Glee* by no means marks the end of the musical on television. The show is credited with a resurgence in regular music performances on television series. *Nashville* (ABC,

2012-present), which takes an insider's view of the country music industry, and *Empire* (Fox, 2015-present), chronicling the drama within a family-owned hip-hop record label, have both been credited as successors to *Glee*'s model; while musical performances stay within the confines of traditional performance, they are still used to convey emotion and carry plot (Hinckley). It can easily be argued, as well, that *Glee* has increased awareness of the musical to more mainstream audiences, or at least piqued the interest of networks; the short-lived NBC series *Smash* (2012-2013), and the network's live airings of traditional Broadway musicals *The Sound of Music* (2013), *Peter Pan* (2014), and *The Wiz* (2015) owe a debt to the path paved by *Glee* (Wagmeister). The fans known as "Gleeks" are also flocking to see their favorite *Glee* cast members as many move on to Broadway careers. Darren Criss grossed \$4 million in a three week run in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* in 2012, and in 2015 he took over the title role in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Cohen); Matthew Morrison and Jane Lynch have also seen successful runs in *Finding Neverland* (2015) and *Annie* (2013), respectively. Meanwhile, as musicals on television seemingly shift back to more traditional schematics, such as industry-based series or stand-alone programming, a question remains; can the type of heightened reality that was created by flash mobs and highlighted by *Glee* happen again, especially with the rise in use of social media keeping users more informed and therefore less surprise-able? If the past history of performance art and guerilla theatre is an indicator, then yes, there will always be some form of spontaneous performance; and while people do not in fact randomly burst into song--outside of their cars, showers, or a highly staged, planned, and choreographed performance made viral by social media--for a short period in popular culture history, the heightened reality generated by *Glee*'s popularity and the spread of flash mobs made it feel like they could.

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