Mississippi State University

Scholars Junction

11-7-2014

It's Not Unusual: Glee and the Mainstream Acceptance of Spontaneous Public Performance

Elizabeth M. Downey
Mississippi State University, emd93@msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ul-publications

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons, Place and Environment Commons, Social Influence and Political Communication Commons, Social Media Commons, Social Psychology and Interaction Commons, Television Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Downey

MAPACA Conference

Baltimore, MD

November 7, 2014

"It's Not Unusual: *Glee* and the Mainstream Acceptance of Spontaneous Public

Performance"

Television musicals have had an extremely shaky and infamous history before the

breakout success that was the hit Fox Television musical series *Glee*. Before *Glee*'s debut in

2009, when audiences heard of a television musical they probably thought of either syndicated

performance-based shows like the television adaptation of *Fame*, or a series flop such as 1990's

Steven Bochco police procedural *Cop Rock* or the Hugh Jackman-produced Vegas-set mystery

Viva Laughlin in 2007. The closest thing to a critical hit was ABC's *Eli Stone*, which unlike the

first two actually lasted a full season; it was cancelled midway through its second season and the

remaining episodes were burned off in the Saturday "death slot" over the summer of 2009

(Lyons).

More successful, both for critics and fans, have been so-called "one-off" episodes of

regular series; these musical episodes broke from the normal format of their respective series.

Mary Jo Lodge focused on three particular episodes when examining what made a musical

outing successful:

- *Xena: Warrior Princess*, "The Bitter Suite." During a fight, Xena and her companion Gabrielle fall over a cliff into a world called "Illusia," where everyone communicates in song.

- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* "Once More with Feeling." A demon comes to Sunnydale which causes everyone to sing out their innermost feelings, including Buffy who resents her friends bringing her back from the afterlife.

- *Scrubs,* "My Musical." Stephanie D'Abruzzo (Tony-nominated for her role in *Avenue Q*) plays Patti Miller, a woman suffering from a brain aneurysm which causes her to hear everyone at Sacred Heart Hospital singing rather than speaking.

Lodge pinpointed three commonalities among these television episodes. First, each of these shows already existed in what could be called a "heightened reality." *Xena* and *Buffy* are both part of the fantasy-science fiction-adventure genre, while *Scrubs* focuses on the rich and outlandish imagination of its lead character, J.D. (295). Secondly, each musical episode was decidedly "book-driven," with original songs and libretto. A later episode of *Xena* used the "jukebox musical" format with less positive results, and many blamed *Viva Laughlin's* similar format for its failure (294). Finally, there is the camp aesthetic; even as these series are fantastical compared to other shows, their musical episodes are even more outlandish. There is also distinct "queering" or otherwise "othering" of the content. Just as one example the romantic ballads in each were all sung among same sex pairings; Xena and Gabrielle, *Buffy*'s Willow and Tara, and *Scrubs*'s J.D. and Turk (301-2). Ultimately, in each scenario there is an element of fantasy, a way to explain to the audience to not worry because in the end *it isn't real*:

> …the creators of the series do not believe that musicals happen in the 'real world.' Instead, they suggest bursting into song and dance requires a trip to a world that

resembles the afterlife on *Xena*, a visit from a hellish demon on *Buffy* or a life-threatening brain injury on *Scrubs* (Lodge 299).

In general, most musicals on television have failed because the "bursting into song" conceit challenges our acceptance of "televisual realism." The musical format success has been restricted to the stage and the big screen (and the occasional "stunt" episode during sweeps). Then you have *Glee*. While it shares the camp sensibility with *Xena*, *Buffy* and *Scrubs*, it is a jukebox musical, a format that supposedly doomed other musical series. Yet here it actually benefits the show. For one, it debuted right after the season finale of the reality competition series *American Idol*, to an audience already accustomed to unknown figures singing popular and familiar songs. Jack Harrison theorizes that *Glee's* creators use both recognizable songs and settings to steer the audience around the "realism" obstacle. A show about a glee club, with most of its performances in choir rooms and at competitions, is expected to be musical in nature (262). The performances are also seemingly scattered throughout the episodes, yet are placed where the writers feel they will have the most bearing on the storyline (264). This falls in line with Amit Rai's concept of "media intervals" (19). The range of music is also a factor; by combining current hits with classic songs, *Glee* appeals to a wide audience and introduces younger audience members to older music and vice versa. Viewers become engaged with the show through the actual performances and the stories connected to them; they then can prolong that emotion via iTunes purchases.

An argument can be made that *Glee* doesn't take place in the type of heightened reality that a *Xena*, *Buffy*, or *Scrubs* does (then again, what reality is more heightened than *high school*?). But what if there was a way to create a heightened reality, in the real world? Take this performance from the Season One episode "Dream On." Artie Abrams, who has been confined

to a wheelchair since a childhood car accident, confides in his girlfriend Tina (after her own prying) 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 this fantasy sequence:

[PLAY Video: https://youtu.be/W_2r5RQM5y8]

The performance, with its group choreography, public setting, and creative use of cinematography resembling video taken by hand held cell phone cameras, evokes a real life, 21st century convergence of technology, performance, and public spaces known as the *flash mob*. Flash mobs have introduced that real-life heightened reality; it is no longer unheard of for someone to burst into song in real life. Harrison highlights the audience's familiarity with Web 2.0 and technologies such as YouTube as another possible reason for *Glee's* success, and while not specifically invoking the flash mob, he does give credit to technologies that also "integrate diverse temporalities and narrative devices within a single piece" (264).

Modern flash mobs were invented in 2003 by Bill Wasik, then a senior editor at *Harper's Magazine*. The flash mob had many artistic and political predecessors; the Italian Futurists and "urban spectacles" of the early 20th century (Bowler 782-83), the Dadaists use of pranks and mass media to both create and provoke audience performance (Walker 120-22), Situationist International and its emphasis of détournement and psychogeography (a sort of "urban playground"), guerilla theater, and the happenings of the 1950s and 1960s (Molnar 47). But the flash mobs that Wasik created were not about art, or politics, or really any meaning at all. 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 (56). The target audience that Wasik hoped to exploit was the burgeoning New

York hipster scene (58). Wasik is perhaps the very definition of the "self-hating hipster"; 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).

Wasik declared the flash mob fad "dead" by 2005, but by then the genie was out of the bottle. Flash mobs had begun to spread to other urban areas as well as cultural enclaves such as university campuses. Most of these can fall into one of five types, according to a typography Virag Molnar developed after analyzing and indexing over 200 flash mob videos on YouTube.

- *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, T-Mobile, and Orbitz gum are three companies in particular that have utilized this form of guerilla marketing.

Performance flash mobs, the fifth form in Molnar's typography, are the ones we will focus on, since they are the 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).

Here is an example of a real-life, non-fiction flash mob, that took place in Antwerp, Belgium a few years ago…it has garnered over 28 million views on YouTube:

[PLAY Video: https://youtu.be/7EYAUazLI9k]

Ironically, this flash mob is also an *advertising* flash mob. It was promoting a reality competition on Belgian television to find the next "Maria" for a theatrical production of *The Sound of Music* (adapted from an original Andrew Lloyd Webber-produced series for the BBC). Still, these flash mobs gain millions of views, reblogs, email forwards and media coverage; their popularity speaks to their growth as a performance.

Still, aside from their popularity, how do flash mobs create a heightened reality amenable to the types of situations we see in *Glee* and acclimate audiences to spontaneous performance? I believe there are three transformations that take place. The first is *transformation of place*. This ties back to the Dadaist and Situationist movements that aimed to appropriate public spaces as *mise en scene* 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.

The second transformation is *transformation of audience*. This can be interpreted in a couple of ways. For one thing, there is no *one* audience for a flash mob. John Muse posits that there are in fact multiple audiences; the "unintended audience" of 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 Gap manager, the media, the online audience (some of whom are simply clicking a link in a Tweet or Wall post from a friend), and even the mobbers themselves, who watch each other as well as videos after the event (10-11). The multiple audience concept can even be expanded to some performances on *Glee*; in the episode "Preggers," Kurt gets on the football team and helps to devise a trick play involving a spontaneous performance of "Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)." When the offensive line breaks out into the iconic choreography from the Beyoncé music video, this rattles the intended audience of the opposing team's defense, but also the unintended audience of spectators in the stands. There is another intended audience, only known to Kurt; his father Burt, who he hopes to impress and win approval from. Muse brings up a second way audiences are transformed…they are transformed into performers themselves (12). Think back to both the "Born This Way" performance and the Belgian flash mob. The focus 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 get 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 isn't enough for some; they want to jump into the performance. This is not

a new feeling. Muse states that our social media ensures we are always performing; we carefully select the photos, songs, graphics and thoughts that we want to represent ourselves. In some cases we even have multiple personas; one for our 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*. Returning to place for a moment, technology has already transformed place for us in one direction, by making it more insular. We can turn any public place into private space as we focus on our electronic devices, divorcing us from face-to-face interaction. Who hasn't put in their earbuds partially as a universal code for "don't talk to me?" But the flash mob has turned that concept 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. 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. 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.

Since the prevalence of *Glee*, flash mobs have certainly surged in popularity. They have taken the form of "zombie runs" and stress-relieving "library flash raves" during finals week (Hadro). Theater companies and university drama departments have used them to promote upcoming productions. Colleges and universities use them as recruiting tools, team bonding exercises, and expressions of school spirit (Lewin). Many organizers even point to *Glee* as an

influence and motivator to "mob." A faculty member in the foreign languages department at West Virginia used Lady Gaga's "Telephone" to promote her programs (Ensign); the Seattle-based "Flash Mob the World" does an annual *Glee*-themed mob. Fan communities and "street teams" have organized flash mobs to celebrate their favorite shows and performers (Muse 22). And here, Ohio State University, which shares a common setting with *Glee*, did their own mob that perfectly illustrates the traditional performance mob and how it transforms the student union into a heightened reality:

[PLAY Video: https://youtu.be/HDNOB6TnHSI]

The union is transformed, and in fact evokes the spirit of the "Born This Way" performance. We are transfixed by the performers but also by the reactions of other students, who become unwitting performers themselves to the online viewers. You could almost do a double-take and wonder if you are watching an unreleased *Glee* performance, with multiple camera angles, the scarlet and black school colors shared with William McKinley High and the cheerleader uniforms reminiscent of those worn by the "Cheerios." At the end we see a convergence of the academic and the athletic, the school's then president E. Gordon Gee and the mascot "Brutus the Buckeye," and the students doing the "O-H-I-O," appealing to the commonality of school spirit. And at the end the performers disperse, while the other students still mill about the mezzanine, presumably hoping for more.

The final number of the most recently aired season of *Glee*, to Bastille's "Pompeii," is a nice final bit of meta to end on. It takes place at least *partially* in a public space, and is bookended by two separate nods to viewers. The "New Yorkers" are about to go their separate ways but agree to meet at that same spot in six months. In the middle of a group hug, Kurt triggers the breaking of the fourth wall with a self-reverential comment, saying it's the perfect

moment for them to burst into song…. which they do. But it's what comes at the end that is most interesting. The performers look directly into the camera; they face us, the audience, as if to acknowledge not just our role in their success but their role in how we now view our reality. And our reality is a place and a community where at any moment, someone will freeze, or start a pillow fight, or genuflect at the foot of an animatronic dinosaur at Toys R Us. Or they may just burst into song.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

Bowler, Anne. "Politics as Art." *Theory & Society* 20.6 (1991): 763-94. Print.

Ensign, Rachel Louise. "Yesterday's Student Flash Mob Is Today's College-Sponsored Dance Mob." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57.13 (2010): A6. Print.

Hadro, Josh. "As Finals Approach, Students De-Stress at Library Dance Parties." *Library Journal* (10 Dec. 2009). Web. 4 Nov. 2014.

Harrison, Jack. "The Television Musical: *Glee's* New Directions." *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First Century Programming.* Ed. Ames, Melissa. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 257-69. Print.

Lewin, Tamar. "College Flash Mobs Become Pep Rallies Made for YouTube." *New York Times* 4 October 2011: A12. Print.

Lodge, Mary Jo. "Beyond 'Jumping the Shark': The New Television Musical." *Studies in Musical Theatre* 1.3 (2007): 293-305. Print.

Lyons, Margaret. "Goodbye Forever, 'Eli Stone,' but Here's to Burn-off Programming." *Entertainment Weekly* 12 Jul 2009. Web. 4 Nov. 2014.

Molnar, Virag. "Reframing Public Space Through Digital Mobilization: Flash Mobs and Contemporary Urban Youth Culture." *Space and Culture* 17.1 (2014): 43-58. Print.

Muse, John H. "Flash Mobs and the Diffusion of Audience." *Theater* 40.3 (2010): 9-23. Print.

Rai, Amit. S. *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage*. Duke

University Press, 2009. Print.

Walker, Rebecca A. "Fill/Flash/Memory: A History of Flash Mobs." *Text and Performance*

Quarterly 33.2 (2013): 115-32. Print.

Wasik, Bill. "My Crowd." *Harper's Magazine* Mar. 2006: 56-66. Print.

Media Cited

"Born This Way." *Glee*. Fox Television. *Netflix*. Web. 22 Jul. 2014.

"Dream On." *Glee*. Fox Television. *Netflix*. Web. 22 Jul. 2014.

"Preggers." *Glee*. Fox Television. *Netflix*. Web. 22 Jul. 2014.

"The Untitled Rachel Berry Project." *Glee*. Fox Television. *Hulu*. Web. 22 Jul. 2014

"Silly Love Songs." *Glee*. Fox Television. *Netflix*. Web. 22 Jul. 2014.

Sound of Music | Central Station Antwerp (Belgium). Matthias De Boeck, 23 Mar. 2009.

YouTube. Web. 8 Sept. 2014. < http://youtu.be/7EYAUazLI9k >.

Flash Mob at the Ohio Union 5/3/2010 - The Ohio State University. TheOhioUnion. 3 May

2010. *YouTube.* Web. 8 Sept. 2014. < http://youtu.be/HDNOB6TnHSI >.