Once Upon A Flash
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It was a dark and stormy evening. A young man in a dark blue Adidas jacket, collar turned up, eyes under green-black shades, hopped off a motorbike, tucked his thumbs into the front pockets of his low-slung retro jeans and surreptitiously made his way through a road thronging with rush-hour traffic and irate pedestrians yelping on their cellphones. He skipped across death traps with skilled ease: leaping over potholes, jumping over half-dug trenches, avoiding the occasional pair of doggy jaws that longed to mate with his ankles, ignoring the bikers who were using the pavements as new lanes for driving towards a honking traffic jam bathed in an orange and red neon that made the road look like a piece of burnt toast with dollops of vicious jam on it.

After five minutes of brisk walking, he slowed down as if he had reached just where he wanted to be – nowhere in particular. On his left were the large Acropolis buildings, towering over the world from their gated existence, structured in pompous Greek columns and facades of granite, stone and marble. On his right, on the other side of the road, if you looked over the metal head of the traffic, you could see the small roadside restaurant that announced fresh fish at cheap rates, sitting cosily under a starved-looking tree, happily encroaching upon the pavement, forcing the pedestrians to disembark, navigate the traffic and then come back to the relative safety of the footpath.

Caught between these two ironies, he stayed put for a while, glancing at his *chor bazaar* Rado model that flashed on his left wrist. He headed towards the mall that rose in glass and neon, false curves and studious lines across the quickly staining sky of a Saturday evening. As he walked into the mall, the automatic doors that sensed his corporeal presence opened up for him and the girl in a polka-dotted blue-and-red dress threw him the smile that desk attendants save for strangers. The gush of cold airconditioned air and the noises of window shoppers greeted him to ease; mannequins in windows, draped in the latest fashions and various states of undress, winked at him; the smell of freshly brewed coffee came and enveloped him. He headed with ungrim determination towards the round performance area in the mall centre. Like many other hangers-out he too loitered without apparent intent around it, just another boy out on a Saturday evening.

Suddenly his cell phone buzzed. His alarm sounded in loud tones to blend with the Britney Spears playing on the mall sound system. He fished out a bright bumblebee-yellow bandana and tied it to his head. As he did that, the performance area turned into a sea of people wearing varied shades of yellow, blasting their cell phone alarms at full volume till all you could hear was a grating disharmony that would have caused comment on a railway station in India. The phones soon faded and a group of about 70 people formed a human ring, holding hands, their heads swathed in yellow, and sang at the top of their voices the first two stanzas of *Hum Honge Kamyaab* – the Hindi rendering of the famous song *We Shall Overcome*. Once the song sank into a bewildered silence, the people in yellow bandanas fell on their knees, raised their hands towards heaven and roared with laughter before quickly pulling off their headgear and dispersing, leaving an empty space and a gawking audience who just had their first dose of a 'flashmob' – a group of people who assemble together, suddenly, in a public place, perform an unexpected sets of choreographed actions and disperse without as much as a by your

leave or with your leave.

Flashmobs trace their history to the early 18th century industrialisation, when a group of women working in the labour shops[1] in Australia used coded messages to meet and discuss the problems they had in their workplaces. These meetings were organised at random, and the women used the very technologies of production that they engaged with at work on a daily basis to fight the oppression and the injustice of the people at the top. The first modern flashmob, however, is attributed to Bill Wasik, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, who, after the first failed attempt (May, 2003), managed to pull a successful flashmob where 200 people swarmed over the mezzanine floor of the Manhattan departmental store Macy's, pretending to buy a 'love rug' for their commune where they supposedlyall lived together; they left a bewildered audience and a bemused store staff behind them (3rd June, 2003).

Organise, congregate, act, disperse – that is the anatomy of a flash mob. A polymorphous set of people are brought together through the commonality of subscribing to similar technological interfaces or gadgetry. Random e-mails, short messages (sms) on cell phones, discrete messages embedded in public works of art or media, blogs and wikis have now been successfully used to conjure these tenuous group formations that temporarily transform the space that they arrive at – flash sites – into something that neither the audience they perform to nor the state can comprehend, thus producing that space in a condition of social and physical illegality.

In The Name of Fun
One of the most overarching icons of a globalised economy has been the credit card – virtual money that has changed the way we think of money, capital and transactions. Visa Power, as the advertisement goes, is looked upon as the quintessential rhetoric of economic globalisation, where the power to change and to create is manifested through the processes of consumption. While technology has been heavily implicated in the creation of this new invisible money, it has remained on the background. The swiping of the card – the physical act of buying without 'paying' has become such a naturalised event that the technology it adopts or the networks it creates are not very visible.. Flash mobs, in their construction, execution and ramifications, foreground technology as one of the most powerful tools of creating new formations of grouping and networking that, through their deliberately devised unintelligibility, transform the spaces they occupy.

This is the story of the first flashmob in India, and how it can be understood through the tropes of illegality, enchantment and transformation. The story starts a little before the flashmob itself. In the year 2000, a shopping mall in Mumbai created a furore amongst the public. It was the first 'genuine' shopping mall in India. The first space that claimed mallhood was in Bangalore – Kemp Fort, but it was more a large shopping store rather than a mall. This first all American shopping mall – Crossroads, with its promises of unlimited pleasure and brand-tagged shopping – attracted the largest crowd in its opening week. Everybody wanted to see what the mall was like. Everybody was curious about this

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[1] These were probably the precedents to the modern day sweat shops that have characterized Globalisation in the 21st century. The 'labour shops' were large stone and concrete buildings which housed workers working around the clock towards incessant production. Women and children were often preferred because they were given lesser wages than men and considered more easily malleable.

space. Everybody wanted to be a part of this exclusive zone that clearly demonstrated that modernity and progress had finally come to us. Then everybody found out that they were not allowed to enter the mall. As the director of the mall pointed out in his interview with The Times of India, (23rd August, 2000), "Crossroads is not meant for everybody".

In those days when cell phones were still a novelty and definitely a curio for the upper classes, and when pagers were still struggling for a mass market, Crossroads passed a stipulation which restricted people not carrying a cell phone or a credit card from entering the mall. If you were still eager to enter the space, you paid extra fees of Rs 50 per head and thus made amends for not carrying a cell phone or a credit card. This was the first time a 'public' space made it very clear that the public it was looking for and attempting to effectively create was not "everybody". The issue was talked about, shouted about, screamed at and criticised by all wings of the media, who passionately analysed this instance of discriminatory practices based on socioeconomics. Later, a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) was filed against the mall; it lost, and had to throw its doors open to "everybody" who had been clamouring to get in ever since they found out they were not allowed to enter.

On 4 October 2003, the mall again came into limelight in a manner it had not accounted for. This time it was initiated by an e-mail. About 5,000 original mailers went off to people all around Mumbai and even beyond the city, asking them to have a look at a new blog for Mumbai flashmobs. The blog posted a form asking for name, e-mail address and mobile number. On 3 October several cell phones rang, asking people who had submitted their details in the form to check their inboxes. The eager participants glided to their accounts to find a mail that agonisingly chalked out the time and space of the meeting venue – a flash site. The information was also sent by sms to all members who had volunteered. And then at exactly 5 pm a group of about a hundred participants entered Crossroads. They screamed at the top of their voices and sold imaginary shares belonging to Reliance India. They performed the *garba*. In the middle of dancing they all froze.. And then without so much as a word, after two minutes of historic histrionics, they opened their umbrellas and dispersed, leaving a trail of bewilderment and confusion, as an audience of over a thousand watched with their jaws on the floor.

This was India's first recorded flashmob. A large crowd of people who did not know each other, did not have any largely political purpose in mind and did not really intend to extend the flashmob contact into relationships, got together to perform a set of ridiculous actions at Crossroads, thus marking it as the first flash site in India. Ironically, the group that converted the mall into mayhem consisted of whom Anne Balsamo calls the hyperreal people – people whose identities are created by the hypervisual and extra-physical aesthetics of the digital technologies that they deploy - who were once the only legitimate owners of the space of that mall. This first flashmob sparked off many others all around the nation – most of them marking out spaces such as multiplexes, shopping malls, gaming parlours, body shops, large commercial roads and shopping complexes as their flashsite.

Bill Wasik, the creator of the first flashmob in Manhattan, in a recent interview[2], looked upon the flashmob experiment as a study in behavioural psychology of people he called

[2] The transcript of the interview is available at http://www.laweekly.com/ink/04/37/features-bemis.php

"hipsters" – people who would join 'new' or 'cool' things for no reason or investment but to be visible in the new trends and social fads. To a large extent, Wasik's surface analysis seems to hold true. While flashmobs have been used as a political weapon by several groups and activists in many areas of human rights, queer rights, feminism, political democracy, etc., flashmobs fundamentally exist, like pre-Raphaelite art, for a solipsist reason. Bijoy Venugopal, who produced one of the most celebrated accounts of the Crossroads flashmob[3], mentions how it was all about having some "serious fun". Increasingly, the flashmob organisers in and around the country have disavowed any ideological moorings for the gathering, and forcibly shelve it into the realms of entertainment or leisure. Following the banning of flashmobs in cities like Mumbai and Bangalore (Mid-day, 9th oct. 2003), even though they have invoked the right to freedom of speech and expression, the organisers and the participants have largely produced justifications by claiming to have no political agenda or inclinations in the construction or execution of flashmobs.

In this repeated disavowal of the political, one can read the desire for re-enchantment that flashmobs and mobsters bring with them. Flashsites, defined by the organising of the flashmobs, are usually sites of globalised consumption – an enchanted world of brand names and designer lifestyles that can make you feel as perpetually disoriented as Alice in Wonderland. These sites serve as the symbols of enchantment in the logic of the city[4]. The new urban enchantment and mode of fantasy is located in the circuits of consumerism where, with plastic money and unlimited credit, the consuming citizen can buy all that the heart desires. However, flashmobs, outside these networks of consumption, and constituted by the same people who fit the bill of the citizen as imagined and promoted by the state and the market as they embrace globalisation and its technologies, demand a re-enchantment of the city. They force us to acknowledge the need for such public spaces to be accessible to all, and provide a strong critique of the easily accepted globalised dream in which the state is so heavily investing. Flashmobs become a manifestation of how tenuously networked, fragile communities, their collaboration inspired and enabled by cyberspatial technologies, can contest the very forces that promote and proliferate these technologies. Flashmobs become a site upon which the drama of globalisation, consumption, state and space is discursively and recursively enacted.

In The Name of The Law
That flashmobs are in a condition of illegality is perhaps one of the easiest claims to prove. The very fact that the Mumbai Police, after the first series of flashmobs, invoked Section 37(1) of the Bombay Police Act in the name of security and safety, clearly states how flashmobs are considered outside the law in the most literal sense of the word. The then Mumbai Police Deputy Commissioner of Police, Amitabh Gupta, contacted Rohit

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[3] Venugopal, himself a prolific blogger, blogged about the flashmobs at
http://www.rediff.com/netguide/2003/oct/05flash.htm
[4] Po Bronson, in his spectacular analysis of the Silicon Valley in *The Nudist on the Late Shift*, talks about how in a post-industrial city, the quantifiable icons of enchantment and progress – large factories, smoke spewing chimneys and huge barricaded stone and iron constructions have given way to small and home-like offices which are almost human and hence negligible. In his search for the new symbols of enchantment, Bronson conjures the figure of the nudist on the late shift – an eccentric double billionaire who works and lives in a cubicle and rides on the crest of the IT boom. In the case of third world countries like India, these symbols might well be these new sites of consumption that have come with globalization.

Tikmany, organiser of the first flashmob and moderator of the flashmob blogging community (www.mumbaimobs.org), asking him to shut down the site and stop all further attempts at organising flashmobs. Following the ban in Mumbai, cities such as Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Delhi have enacted similar bans within the city limits. These censoring forces look at flashmobs as potentially destabilising elements that can be 'misused' for violent acts such as riots and bombings by fundamentalist organisations.

However, of greater interest is the way in which flashmobs manage to reproduce flashsites in conditions of social and physical illegality by creative deliberate structures of transient unintelligibility. The leisure infrastructure of malls and multiplexes, cafes and large shopping complexes, gaming zones and commercial roads of consumption, are all aimed at the new citizenry that comes into being with these new urban economies falling into place. These spaces are not only legitimate spaces of self-expression through consumption, but also authorised spaces of public assembly and gathering. They promote an ethos of incessant consumption where the individual is also installed as a consumable product that relates to others in the processes of consumption. They are the locations where brands, accessories and lifestyles all come together as the figureheads of a sanitised economy which strives to make opaque the surrounding subcultures of piracy, theft, copying and distributing that emerge around such nodal points[5]. To belong to the space of a mall or a shopping complex, one needs to almost automatically endorse the original, the authentic, the expensive, as a way of making a conscious statement of style and lifestyle. These potential flashsites become the spaces that the state legitimises as the most visible and sanitised form of urbanisation in contemporary cities.

However, flashmobs definitely subvert the sanctity or the sanity of such spaces by compelling them to suddenly introject disruptive conditions of unintelligibility. Flashmobs force the other participants of the space to enter into a narrative of confusion and chaos; of turbulence, thus rendering the space of consumption incomprehensible for the short time that the flashmob unfolds. Moreover, flashmobs do not fall under globalisation's rhetoric of consumption, and do not require any special access powers or consumption rites, thus defying the discriminatory protocols that such spaces put in motion under the uneasily hovering sign "Rights of Admission Reserved". Flashmobs, by rejecting the very use and expectation of the space, in spite of the heavy surveillance, state opposition and hi-tech policing, are able to distort the formulaic narratives of the space, thus creating alternative structures of resistance, of transformation, of transition. State apparatus gets completely paralysed when faced with such a radical reconfiguring, and thus goes out of its way to put a special ban upon flashmobs in a city where even a small defeat in a cricket match, or various emotional events such a public mourning or celebration, bring together crowds much louder, more aggressive, tenuous and destructive than conventional flashmobs. The transient illegality that flashmobs produce is not only at the level of the law but also at the level of legibility and comprehension.

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[5] One of the more exciting facets of digital technologies and globalization has been the debate over property, ownership and theft. Easy duplication of brands and bypassing the traditional circuits of distribution or sale of property have created the glorified figure of the pirate who straddles the worlds of the legal and the illegal, the digital and the physical, the ephemeral and the tactical with great ease. Within the sanctuarised spaces of malls and shopping complexes, these referents to the other world of cheap duplicates and mobile consumables hang uneasily. There is a constant attempt at establishing the original and the legitimate over the fake or copied replicas which are available in the grey markets that emerge around them.

"What do the mobsters do when they come together for a flashmob?" is a wrong question to ask. While the actions of the mobsters might be bizarre and lacking in meaning, often uninformed by any obvious ideology, flashmobs do produce new modes of signification and networking patterns, unprecedented in modern history. The ephemeral nature of the flashmobs, the improbably pseudonymous identities of the participants, the technologically mediated communication and networking patterns, all hint towards a certain notion of technosociality, where the social world around us is profoundly affected by the technologies that we adopt. In these unexpected eruptions, flashmobs create a new relationship between actors, audience and the spaces that they inhabit, including all the three into the circuits of digital technologies. As a form of radical localised performance, flashmobs offer a way to question the hierarchical intentionality of the spaces that they transform; they embody new ways in which technologies interface with our daily life, producing new forms of technosocial living.