



The Digital Queue: Flashmobs in Line, Online and the New Aesthetics of Community Building

ANDREW CHAPMAN
Dartmouth College

Abstract: In 2004 an online group Flash Mob Latvia (FM Latvia) staged a gathering in in the Old City of Riga, forming a mock queue in the middle of Livu Square. The performance, titled ‘The Queue to Nowhere’, featured fifty people and was joined by witnessing outsiders. The line started and ended in the middle of the square, where there are noticeably no businesses, no products and no servers. The video was uploaded onto *YouTube*, where it garnered 26,000 views. This is one example of many flashmob queues that have appeared across post-socialist cities in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Moldova, Kazakhstan and Russia, organised online through social media networks and implemented in person. This essay discusses how these social media groups gather, reviving the half-dead phenomena of the Soviet-era queue to create new aesthetics of community building. Flashmob queues do not result in actual purchases, subverting the norms of the marketplace and transforming empty practices of consumption into new local cultural expressions rooted in everyday life.

Keywords: queue, flashmob, social networks, social media, crowd studies, reflexive modernisation, everyday life, consumption, performance

‘We are children of the internet. When we were born,
there was already sausage’. – Flashmob participant Denis
(qtd. Solov’eva 2011)

We commonly associate flashmobs with intricate theatrical performances that occur in urban spaces, where people bustle about on their business and daily commute. They take place in social milieus, where the transient qualities of everyday life are rooted in consumption and anonymous transactions. City squares, train stations and shopping malls are all

places that people temporarily inhabit to make purchases, only to disperse after minimal social interaction. On this urban stage, choreographed flashmob performances interrupt the monotony and repetition of everyday life, suspending individual movement to perform a common harmonious act. The seemingly disorderly and dissociated mob unites for a brief moment in organizational synchronization to perform an unexpected routine: often a song or dance sequence that does not typically occur in everyday places. They remind us of the unpredictability of everyday life, which is worthy of spectatorship.

While flashmobs today mainly revolve around choreographed performance, they originated in subversive practices of non-consumption, where people occupied stores and shopped for items that either did not exist or that they had no intention of buying. The phenomenon dates back to a performance in Manhattan in June 2003. Drawing the ire of salesclerks, 100 so-called customers descended upon a Macy's department store, pretending to be a commune of hippies looking for a 'love rug' (Shmuell 2003). Flashmobs grew rapidly in popularity over that summer across the United States, Europe and Asia, with mobs occupying stores and other public spaces, eventually evolving into the form we associate with them today, but it is important to note that the origins of the flashmob occurred mostly in stores, subverting the authority of commercial spaces.¹

FM Latvia's 'The Queue to Nowhere' is one of several queuing flashmobs to appear across post-socialist cities over the past ten years. Others can be found in the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Moldova and numerous cities in Russia.² In this essay, I analyse several examples of these flashmobs that appeared in post-socialist urban spaces, detailing how each forwarded their own agenda through the prism of the queue. The legacy of the Soviet-era queue is appropriated by flashmob performers, creating a sharp contrast with the globalising post-socialist landscape and recent geopolitics of sanctions and anti-sanctions.³ The queue, which once signified the failure or inability to consume, is transplanted into consumptive capitalist spaces where not only are there no lines, but an abundance of cash registers and products ready for checkout. This very scenario actually played out in a supermarket in Arkhangel'sk, Russia in 2010, where one group named 29 City FM formed a long line at a checkout register, purposely standing in only one line, leaving numerous adjacent registers in the store empty (LUCKYSMILENETWORK 2010).

Viewing these performances as being symptomatic of the changing post-socialist landscape, I utilise Scott Lash's notion of *Reflexive Modernization* (1994), which accounts for how subjects of late modernity find local expression through self-reflective creative action. Through Lash's work, I examine how performances of non-consumption draw in and manipulate symbols of the past, imbuing current discourses of consumption with new (or old)

¹ 'Cash mobs' later appeared in 2012 in the United States, which mobilised crowds online to support local businesses that are often in stiff competition with large corporations (Palmer 2012).

² See LUCKYSMILENETWORK (2010), Maxim Grishin (2011), 'Fleshmob v skvere Lobachevskogo' (2014) and 'Ochered' (2011) for *YouTube* videos and press releases on various flashmob queues.

³ Konstantin Axenov, Isolde Brade and Evgenij Bondarchuk (2006) discuss the complexities of modernisation in Eastern Europe in their term 'the post-transformation city', which posits that Eastern European cities have certain peculiarities left over from socialist urban planning. Rejecting the idea that post-socialist cities caught up and modernised, they find the process of transformation not fully complete: 'First modernisation was not the only process that took place during transformation. At the very least, transformation also included the process of restructuring/adaptation of the old socialist economy and society' (27). Modernisation does not constitute the complete replacement of one state for another, just as globalisation is an ongoing process (globalising), where localised meanings interact with new influences.

meaning. I am interested in how practices of non-consumption create moments of self-reflection for those who place themselves in opposition to or outside of dominant economic systems. Lastly, I want to question how our preexisting notions of performativity and participation are challenged by the seemingly inactive or non-consummating nature of non-consumptive actionist strategies.

The artistic revival of second-world practices acts in ways to negotiate and counteract the fractured and uneven spaces of westernisation and globalisation. New communities emerge through playful simulations and performances of shared past experiences, compensating and counteracting present-day inequality. The flashmob queue epitomises the notion of reflexive modernisation in that it is created within the current consumer world, yet goes against the rules of this sphere by calling attention to its presence. These queues simultaneously reaffirm the existence of structures in which they emanate, but cast off the value of commodities in favor of performative elements—areas that lead to nowhere, purchase wise—but lead somewhere, in terms of creating new cultural meaning and values. While the contemporary culture of abundance and immediacy that came with the world of western advertising proclaimed that anyone can skip the queue, an exact opposite movement emerges: a willingness to embrace the stability of the queue and its ideology of fair allocation over the inequalities of market capitalism and its promises of abundance and instant gratification for those who have the cash to spend.⁴

Flashmob queues transform notions of communality once associated with socialist consumerist practices to that of a renewed expressive local community that gathers for other purposes than that of consumption.⁵ As more and more people make online purchases, bypassing the store and avoiding social interactions with other people in favor of online checkouts, the flashmob reintroduces the crowd to recover a bygone site of pre-digital capitalist consumption. In this process, I theorise how allocative economic structures become cultural structures, converting the nostalgia of the Soviet queue in order to forward a new aesthetics of local community building that transcends the practices of consumption which originally brought people together. The queue was once a spontaneously forming entity that marked the Soviet subject's lack of agency, as people jumped into queues without evening knowing what was being sold. Instead, the queue is recast as a digitally organised entity, with people publicly displaying their choice to freely occupy space as a type of cultural expression, political statement or leisure activity.

Post-socialist legacies and reflexive modernisation

I interviewed one of the group members of FM Latvia, Vadim, who uploaded the video 'The Queue to Nowhere' to *YouTube*. The group of 50 had planned to assemble for ten minutes, but lasted only two before the head of the line left and the line dispersed. Vadim recalled how it is impossible to control a flashmob, and that in general it is not needed: 'You give a script,

⁴ Interestingly, the phrase to acquire something "outside the queue" ("*vne ocheredi*") has become commonplace in current advertising as the visible queues that were mainstays of the Soviet era.

⁵ This is not to say that Soviet-era queues did not also exert their own cultural identities, but instead identifies a different impetus of why these present-day queues gather.

place and time then nothing else depends on you. Everything that happens on the street happens on its own' (Vadim 2012).

Image 1. FM Latvia's queue at Livu Square



Source: Vadim Ch (2007)

Vadim looked back on the practice of queuing in the Soviet Union both with great nostalgia and disdain:

I think that during the Soviet period, the queue was a good reflection of the common direction of the people. There was a purpose, there was movement, take your place in line and live. People were born in lines and died in them. And everyone stood, waited, and hoped that their time would come and they would receive something, that there was not enough of for everyone. (Vadim 2012)

He additionally identified how post-Soviet life is still based on the principles of queuing, noting how corporations follow vertical hierarchies of structures and how current education stresses passing specific steps as the key means of achievement in life. What was more interesting, however, is that he found the remnants of the queue particularly damaging in the present day:

The life of these half-dead structures is stamped out in the beliefs of whole classes of people, for the most part remaining in the older generation, in their inviolable valuing of life

priorities, and the formations in society of the last century. This happened under the influence of various socio-economic processes occurring in the Soviet Union and in the world. The change happened very quickly. I think we all see it. But unfortunately the mentality of the majority of us is constructed, such that we are not always capable of picking up on these little changes in the surrounding environment, and they continue to dictate a drawn out script of old rules, that in the present time the game has ceased to exist. (Vadim 2012)

Vadim's comments reflect the ways in which modern societies evolve, yet practices are retained that often do not align. The flashmob performances are meant to estrange the viewer, so that he or she realises the inconsistencies and contradictions between the habitual mentality of people and the present-day realities of everyday life. The recovery of everydayness, thus, occurs as the usual is transformed into the unexpected. The queue as a half-dead social structure is transformed and revitalised, from its tradition as a symbol of the drudgery of everyday life to a place of opportunity and novelty. Furthermore, the queue is celebrated as a cultural structure, a place where local communities find and create expression, rather than as an allocative structure, where it was once used to delineate the material needs of the populace. One of the most interesting points of the interview, was how Vadim recognised the social potential of both the queue and the flashmob, which both unite people:

On the positive side, social life in the queue is impossible to underestimate. It is very pleasant to be a part of something so lively as a unified organism. Just yesterday there was the possibility that you did not know these people, and today one is standing in front of you, another behind. Of course this type of spasmodic, self-organising looks a lot like a flashmob. Except there is one difference: the goal is not as transparent and often is quite unattainable. (Vadim 2012)

Vadim also noted the viral or contagious nature of several of FM Latvia's performances, where random bystanders joined the group.

Regardless of whether 'The Queue to Nowhere' shook people out of their habitual stupor, what is important is that the act creates new cultural meaning, and is symptomatic of a new collective of creative people. Scott Lash, one of the authors of *Reflexive Modernization*, would call this type of person an aesthetic-expressive meaning-creating subject, whose presence in late modernity is ubiquitous. Lash describes how subjects capitalise on common meanings and engrained practices that stem from the subject's lack of agency, to create new meaning out of the constructs of modernisation. In our case, what was once a social practice that defined the subject's lack of agency becomes recast as a choice, where the subject freely occupies space and does not rely on the product of his or her consumption at the front of the line.

Inversions of modernisation, according to Lash, are not simply binarised into a modern/postmodern division, but instead feature self-reflexive movements that resituate the trajectories of modernism. He points out that modernisation always had a haunting double, such as the free market of capitalism turning into the hierarchically structured monopoly of the firm, or in this case, the egalitarian ideals of socialist allocation becoming entrenched in the hierarchy of the *nomenklatura*, the proliferating Soviet bureaucracy who always received the best goods. Yet late modernisation also features a reflexive side: one that inverts or re-

flects previous movements to create new spaces that are not just created for the sake of progress.⁶ Social actors create agency in relation to existing structures and open up new spaces beyond the consequences of modernism's dystopian turn.

Lash's analysis describes the potential aesthetic expressions that came out of late modernity. Objects represent not only the commercial world in which they originate, but also serve as conceptual symbols that articulate the conditions of reflexivity:

The same is true of the 'mimetic' symbols, of the images, sounds and narratives making up the other side of our sign economics. On the one hand, as the commoditised, intellectual property of the culture industries they belong to the characteristically post-industrial assemblage of power. On the other they open up virtual and real spaces for the popularisation of aesthetic critique of that same power/knowledge complex. (Lash 1994: 135)

Lash sees this movement as inversion, as a way for communities to express individuation, operating within and alongside the dominating social structures of modern life. In the globalising world, where shrinking time-space distantiations disrupt stable definitions of distinction or that of a local community, individuation often occurs in the improvisational and contingent responses to modernisation, rather than through essentialised identities.

The digital queue and flashmob media

Lash's term aesthetic-expressive meaning-creating subject predates the everyday presence of amateur online producers, but is nonetheless relevant. In Russia, this type of person fits into the highly charged category of the 'creative class', the present-day group of tech-oriented individuals whose liberal values descend from the Soviet intelligentsia. It makes perfect sense to me that the creative class finds its roots in the intelligentsia, as intellectuals were denied higher-level salaries during the late Soviet period and especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They became the primary innovators in pirating and bootlegging of media in the 1990s and early 2000s, which eventually evolved into more acceptable practices of legal commercial activity such as online marketing and website design. This function of the emerging creative class is not surprising given that the intelligentsia carried out many of these same pre-digital practices in the form of samizdat. Today's creative class likewise seeks alternative cultural expressions often with the aid of information technology in order to counter the mainstream. They are derogatively referred to by political conservatives as *kreakly*, which targets their identity of being liberal minded and morally elite; in other words, a hipster.⁷

The emergence of flashmobs is highly symptomatic of developing practices of cellular and internet communications, with more and more people gathering in organised swarms with

⁶ One of the co-authors of *Reflexive Modernization*, Anthony Giddens, has written that late modernisation is a process that constantly reassesses itself as an object of reflection: 'The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (38). He states that the characteristic of modernity is not 'an embracing of the new for its own sake', but rather 'the presumption of wholesale reflexivity', which is an act of expression that brings about new directions (39).

⁷ See Daria Shembel's entry on the term, 'Kreakl and the Creative Class' (2013).

the aid of their smartphones and other devices.⁸ The popularity of various meetups certainly derives from and takes advantage of commonplace amateur media production, where anyone can self-record and upload media to the internet in order to gain exposure. Prearranged in on-line groups via text messaging and social network posting, the flashmob event rapidly mobilises, gathers, records its actions and later edits and uploads a media product to the internet.

On *YouTube*, all of the flashmob queues are tagged under the video categories of ‘comedy’ and ‘nonprofit and activism’. FM Latvia’s films are titled by the group as ‘Flashmob-Films’, and are often intercut with a variety of media. Many feature title screens and opening and closing credits (Image 2).

Image 2. Title screen of ‘The Queue to Nowhere’



Source: Vadim Ch (2007)

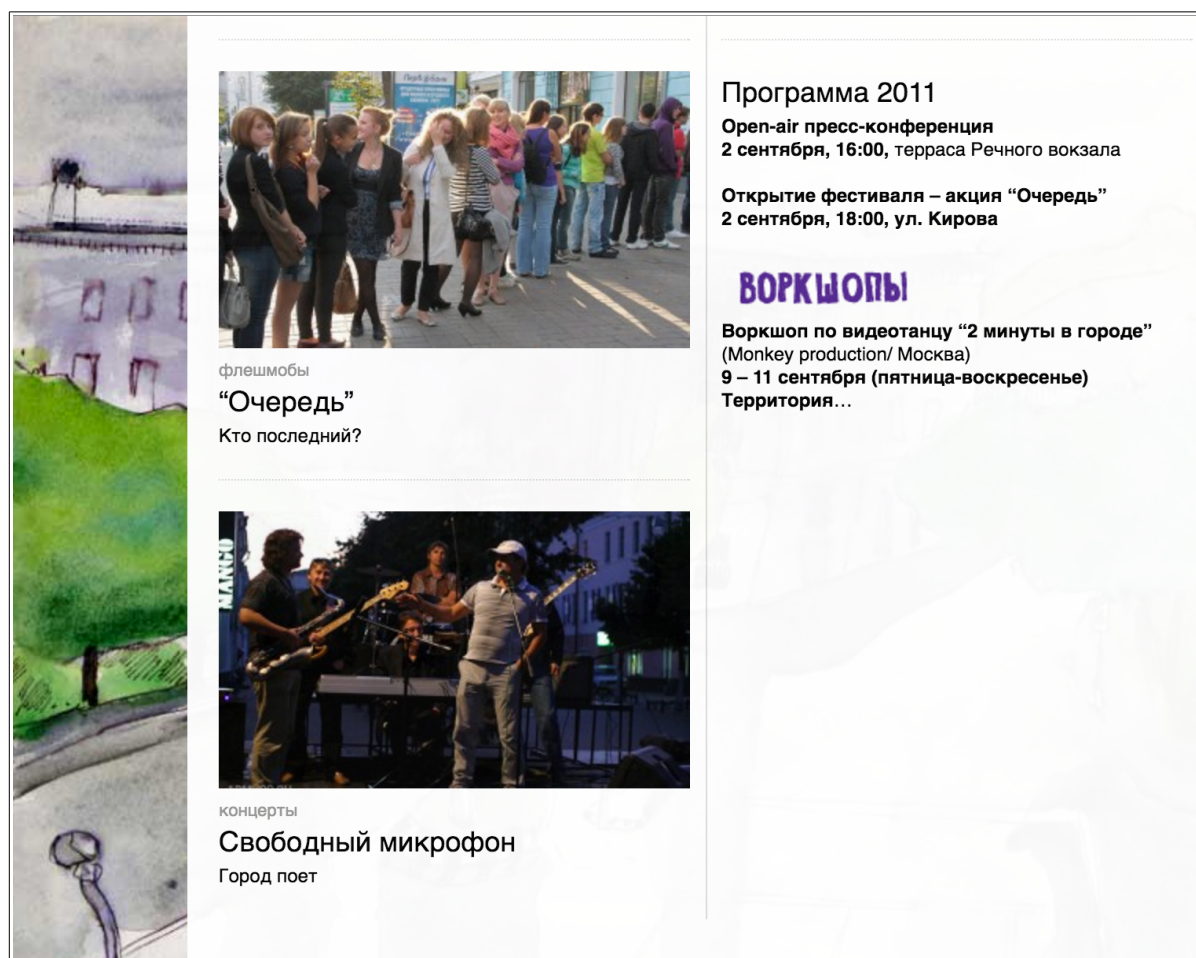
‘The Queue to Nowhere’ was edited with sound effects and music from Vladimir Bortko’s film adaptation *Heart of a Dog* [Sobach’e serdtse, 1988], and begins with Sharikov’s famous line, ‘To the queue, you sons of bitches, to the queue!’ (V ochered’, sukinye deti, v ochered’!). The citation of *Heart of a Dog* recalls Vadim’s comments about people being stuck in their habitual routines. Mikhail Bulgakov’s novella humorously portrays the changing of times through Sharik(ov), the street roaming dog that through scientific experiment is transformed into a new Bolshevik citizen, yet of course retains his dog-like instincts. Western film genre

⁸ See Joss Hands on how social networks create organised swarms, which he calls an ‘emergent intelligent entity’ (2011: 126).

music, as well as James Brown’s classic ‘I Got You’ (1965) is also played.⁹ The overlaid sounds convey a mixture of emotions, from the vulgarity of *Heart of a Dog*, to the desolate atmosphere created by the music of the western film genre, to the sarcastic elation conveyed by James Brown’s lyrics ‘I feel good’!

Other flashmob queues that I came across used advertising to highlight public events, with calls for participants disseminated across social media. One queue in Iarolsavl’ was included, perhaps ironically, as the opening act of a 2011 citywide festival called ‘The Architecture of Movement’ (Image 3).

Image 3. ‘The Opening of the Festival – Stunt (*aktsiia*) “The Queue”’



Программа 2011
Open-air пресс-конференция
 2 сентября, 16:00, терраса Речного вокзала

Открытие фестиваля – акция “Очередь”
 2 сентября, 18:00, ул. Кирова

ВОРКШОПЫ
Воркшоп по видеотанцу “2 минуты в городе”
 (Monkey production/ Москва)
 9 – 11 сентября (пятница-воскресенье)
 Территория...

флешмобы
“Очередь”
 Кто последний?

концерты
Свободный микрофон
 Город поет

Source: <http://armv.ru/line/>

The call for participants on the festival website states that the basic goal was to entice people passing by to join the line: ‘At one of the entrances to the building is a queue, which gradually grows and doesn’t think about solidifying. People stand for something, waiting for something. There is nothing morose or irritating about it, no one elbowing one another, but

⁹ Some of FM Latvia’s other performances splice Soviet-era media. One performance, titled ‘Flamingo’ features the voiceover of the famous Soviet educational nature show ‘In the World of Animals’ [‘V mire zhivotnikh’, 1968-present].

instead they are happy, communicating and smiling to one another' ('Ochered'' 2011). The press release reveals a new attitude towards the post-Soviet city that enables its citizen: 'The new movement and mood of the city is in your hands!'

The event is clearly oriented toward younger people. Most of the people taking part in these movements are from younger generations, the majority of whom never fully experienced the Soviet period. In a post-event press release, the festival quoted participants, including the aforementioned Denis, who proclaimed that he is a child of the internet. Another participant lamented that queues are still ever-present in Russia for state-controlled services:

You think that our queues have disappeared? Have you tried to buy train tickets? To get an international passport? When I received my first passport, I stood in line for two and a half hours. As it was explained, 'not in this office'. (qtd. Solov'eva 2011)

People showed up to the Iaroslavl' queue, hearing rumors that they might receive gifts: concert tickets, boots, or perhaps that the event was staged by Microsoft. After people assembled, the coordinator of the festival welcomed everyone, but no one walked away with any gifts, other than a 'smile on their faces', according to the press release (qtd. Solov'eva 2011).

Image 4. McDonald's in 1990



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk9KY4ogvgI> (22.06.2017)

Image 5. McDonald's in 2014

Source: Feshenko (2014)

All of these events (*aktsii*) seek to displace the queue from its commercial footings, by proving that one should not need to consume to be happy.¹⁰ In Russian, the ambiguity of the word *aktsiia* can be used to describe subversive activism (an action or stunt), yet it also can denote a commercial promotion (an ad campaign or sale). We see two understandings of personal fulfillment and self-identification: one ideology that is based in dispositions of non-consumption while the other openly embraces fetishism and consumption of marketed goods.

These innocuous acts that disrupt everyday life become even more highly visible and powerful when they are encoded with political subtexts that gain the broadcast media's spotlight. In 2014, 34 people queued on Pushkinskaia Square at the oldest McDonalds in Russia, which was closed by Moscow city administration for sanitary and technical reasons, but mainly seen as a response to western sanctions and McDonald's decision to temporarily close its restaurants in the recently seized Crimea.¹¹ The Pushkinskaia McDonalds was famous for the queues that appeared outside its entrance upon the restaurant's opening in 1990, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Image 4).

Recreating this atmosphere, protesters queued outside of the closed McDonalds, displaying the failure to consume as an act of defiance against the city administration (Image 5). If

¹⁰ This idea is very much at the heart of the documentary film *Czech Dream* [Český sen, 2004] where the film directors Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda lured thousands of shoppers to the grand opening of a hypermarket, only then revealing the store to be a façade in front of an empty field.

¹¹ See 'V Moskve aktivisty proveli fleshmob' (2014) and Fesenko (2014).

we take the protesters' message to be ironic, that is they were not lamenting their inability to buy a Big Mac or Chicken McNuggets, we can see that both sites of consumption, the queue and McDonalds restaurant, are easily appropriated to drive a political message that is located somewhere in between a disdain for the globalising, neoliberalising world epitomised by world banking, box stores and bad fast food, and the local nationalist politics of Putin's government that have come to resist it.¹² The stability of locating a nostalgic past in Soviet-era whimsy turns out to be a fun exercise, but beyond that, consumers are caught between these two worlds where the average person struggles to make ends meet.

Conclusion: queuing for culture and cultural capital

It is not surprising or a coincidence that the largest lines that exist in Russia today are for cultural events. In a recent 2012 issue of *Iskusstvo kino* Ol'ga Andreeva writes that it is precisely within the Russian national tradition where queuing will remain.¹³ Many of the visible queues left are in the cultural arena, where new exhibits at national art galleries attract long lines at their openings. Daylong lines are found for religious ceremonies, most notably in November 2011, when hundreds of thousands waited to see a relic belt of the Virgin Mary at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. While these queues identify Russians' interest to consume high culture, it also points toward their failure to consume more expensive western products. Even before the 2014 crash of the ruble and western sanctions, Russians have endured poor purchasing power since the collapse of the Soviet Union. What is left for people to display in terms of capital remains in the public sphere. People en masse are able to display cultural capital through their attendance of state-sponsored and subsidised cultural events.

Queues for cultural events are not a new phenomenon. We can look back to the Soviet period and immediately recall the year-long queue for Igor Stravinsky's concert upon his return to Leningrad in 1962.¹⁴ The queue is just as much a marker of taste as it is scarcity. In fact, we can go a step further and say that queues dictate taste. They assert local knowledge and a sense of worth, for instance, when we see a crowded restaurant opposite an empty one. A flashmob in Kazan' used this power of persuasion by queuing in front of the National Library of the Republic of Tatarstan to promote reading initiatives on Russia's national library holiday ('Fleshmob v skvere Lobacheskogo' 2016).

The queue to the library is a strong assertion that libraries are still important, albeit an endangered place, in the digital age. This flashmob intends to meet every year on the holiday, in order to visually assert the library's continuing importance in the city. If we look for a digital analog, today's queue resembles more of a meme; both serve as visual signifiers that identify and pronounce cultural tastes, trends and perhaps most importantly, values.

¹² Almira Ousmanova has written about flashmobs as a form of political mobilisation in Belarus following the 2006 presidential elections, likening the formation of people to Belarus' history of partisan warfare: 'The spontaneous mass protests of young people in Belarus... quickly adopted the format of "flash mob" for their needs, thus, transforming it into a quasi-political form of resistance' (2010).

¹³ Andreeva writes that queues in the post-Soviet period have moved away from the 'common suffering' ('obshchee stradanie') and have fashioned a 'common voice' ('obshchii golos') (48).

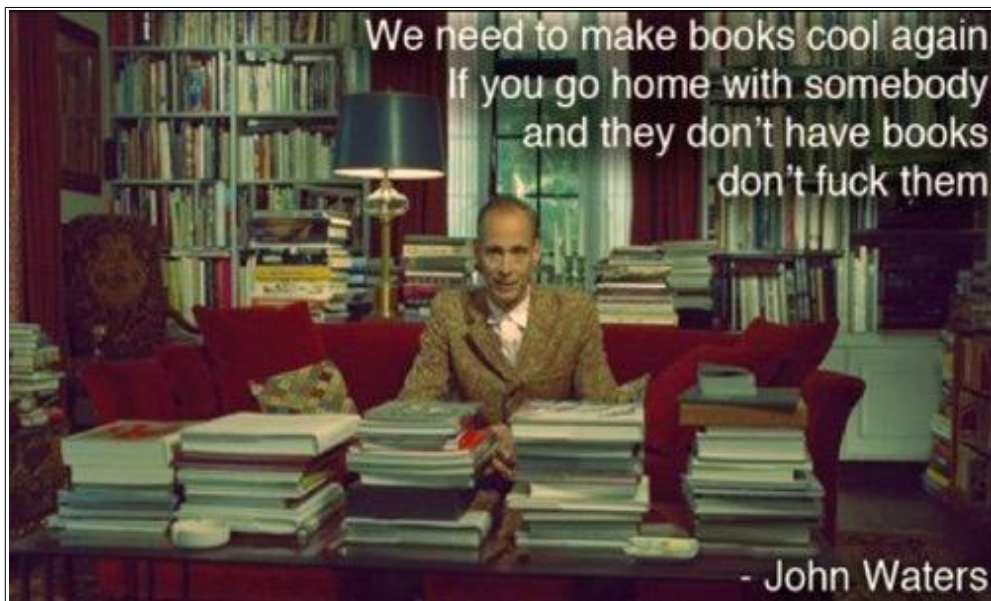
¹⁴ Olga Grushin uses this event as one of the historical subtexts for her ahistorical novel *The Line* (2010).

Image 6. Queuing campaign outside a library in Kazan'



Source: ('Fleshmob v skvere Lobacheskogo' 2016).

Image 7. John Waters reading campaign meme



Source: <http://www.memes.com/img/102282>

The term meme is rooted in genetics and Darwinism, coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 wanting to describe information replication and imitation of ideas as that of a living organism.¹⁵ While memes spread virally online, the queue also has its means of contagion, both on the street where people jump into it at the moment of sight and through hearsay. The queue, just like a meme, acts as an information generator of sorts, in which people communicate while waiting and tell stories to pass the time. During the Soviet period jokes about queues and jokes told while waiting were plentiful. This notion of queue as meme reinforces the idea that in the information age, immaterial sites of information constitute a dominant place of our consumption. It is where we wait to gain access to data and information rather than hard goods.

It would only be appropriate that today's queues are joked about online and serve as the generative text for numerous memes. This was most apparent in 2015, as thousands queued during the Moscow winter for the Valentin Serov exhibit at the Tretyakov Gallery. The queue was widely covered by both Russian and international media and also served as the topic of many memes.¹⁶ While official broadcasts showed Russian's willingness to wait outside in the cold for a glimpse of their cultural heritage, Serov memes counteracted the haughty media coverage of Russia's distinguished cultural capital. They redirected the queue away from its high culture destination, the exhibit, and instead found comedic and cultural value within the queue itself.

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¹⁵See Borenstein (2004) for a discussion of the terminology of memes and their cultural context in Russia.

¹⁶See Efremova (2016) for an analysis of memes related to the Serov exhibition.

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ANDREW CHAPMAN (PhD, Russian Literature and Culture, University of Pittsburgh) is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Russian at Dartmouth College and formerly a Visiting Assistant Professor at the College of William and Mary. Andrew is currently working on his first monograph, titled *Queuetopia: Allocating Culture/Imagining Abundance*, which focuses on second-world cultural production of the Soviet period and how it was constructed through discourses of scarcity and abundance. In the context of digital media, Andrew devotes much of his research to questions of how amateur artists operate in the digital age. His research has appeared in *KinoKultura*, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinemas and Studies in Slavic Cultures*. He is one the creators along with Alyssa DeBlasio of the website project 'Digital Domostroi: Keywords on the Russian Middle Class' (<http://dh.dickinson.edu/digitaldomostroi/>). Andrew also serves as a lead editor for *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (www.digitalicons.org). [Chapman.drew@gmail.com]