A Critical Assessment Of Shopping Malls: From The Carnivalesque Marketplace To The Spectacle Of Malls

*Stream 23: Critical Marketing: Visibility, Inclusivity, Captivity*

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Abstract

According to Lash and Urry, capitalist development follows three stages: The early, locally centred liberal capitalism; the nationally focused organised capitalism; and finally the contemporary, internationally driven disorganised capitalism. The latter is characterised by flexibility at all levels, a global and cross-cultural structure, an economy based on sign systems rather than commodities, an aestheticisation of everyday life and a move towards visual forms of consumption, and greater interconnections between consumption and identity formation (Lash and Urry, 1987 and 1994 cited in Edwards, 2000:181-182).

Shopping malls are forms of disorganised capitalism, which followed arcades and department stores (and in more complicated ways, world exhibitions and medieval carnivals), and yet displayed basic differences. Carnivals, world exhibitions, shopping malls and more recently theme parks have been spaces of display and consumption, devoted to pleasure, defined by their difference from workspaces, and everyday life. They influenced the ways time, space and matter were experienced, and in many cases they created instances of “space-time compression”, in a sense slightly different than that presented first by Harvey (1989): World Exhibitions, theme parks and shopping malls brought together products and images of different locations and historical moments, in a controlled environment where the difference between reality and representation faded away; only to make the outside world ever more real (Baudrillard, 1989). Again in all three, entrance has been subject to limitations; and the flow of people has been directed in order to increase the amount of commodities displayed and their consumption. A range of works explored the development of these various, but related forms; and some traced their relationships. In this paper, shopping malls are chosen for comparison with the marketplace festive activities that are presented in Bakhtin’s work on the medieval carnival.

Bakhtin’s work refers to a period prior to modernity, marked by a division of everyday life between the official sphere, moulded by the church, the feudal system and work; and the unofficial one of reversal, parody, song and laughter (Vice, 1997: 150). The carnival represented this unofficial truth, where excessive consumption and debasement were permitted in a form of laughter, which degraded and materialised anything authoritarian (Bakhtin, 1984a). It allowed for a free contact between people, for all “hierarchical structure and all forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it” were suspended (Bakhtin, 1984b: 122-123). A “continual shifting from top to bottom” transformed spatial practices of the official sphere, opening up the carnival space to inclusive participation (ibid: 10-11).

Although shopping malls share a similar inspiration (‘the marketplace’) with medieval carnivals, their spatial, temporal and social dimensions have had different consequences. From the beginning, shopping malls have been artificial constructions dependent on the prior existence of property, and transport networks. Their interior environment is equally artificial: An enclosed space where spatio-temporal conditions are controlled in such an effective way that “any sense of where one is locally, nationally or even internationally, is lost” (Edwards, 2000:115-116). The stores, products and services offered are similar across different malls, and even countries, creating an undifferentiated mall culture with little room for local experience. Furthermore, shopping malls appeal to mid- and upper-market affluent consumers. They keep out symbolically, if not physically, “socially undesirable” parts of the population through the use of security and surveillance techniques (ibid).

In shopping malls, the material culture of capitalism creates an appearance of variety, a colourful surface, which hide the uniformity of capitalist relations and the resulting inequality and poverty. Malls are forms of a period where the dual realm of existence that characterised the carnival context no longer exists. Instead, the current period is marked by the blurring of the boundaries between laughter and fear: where the capitalism appropriates subversion, and finds new lines of legitimacy in critiques against itself.
This paper aims at comparing and contrasting these different aspects of shopping malls with the Medieval carnival, through the case of Akmerkez. For more than a decade, Akmerkez has been the shopping mall of affluent consumers in Istanbul, but it has also attracted visitors from other cities. It was not the first of its kind, but the first to signify a specific culture and lifestyle. Worldwide brands, which quickly filled shop windows, symbolised the opening of the cityspace to the global culture of consumption. At the same time, Akmerkez pointed to a new period in Istanbul, where not only living areas but also working, shopping and recreation zones of different classes have been completely separated.

References


