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SHOPPING MALL: A NEW VERSION OF MEDIEVAL CARNIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions: Marxist semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s. Bakhtin studies the interaction between the society and the literary works, by analyzing the Renaissance social system in order to discover the balance between language that was permitted and language that was not, following which he pinpoints an important subtext: the “carnavalesque” which he describes as a social institution. This paper is an attempt to analyze shopping mall culture by connecting it with the society of the medieval society’s attitude for freedom.

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Mikhail Bakhtin, the most original thinker in twentieth century Russian Philosophy was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the period of Soviet Union. *Rabelais and His World*, a scholarly work of Bakhtin can be considered as a classic of Renaissance studies. Here in this text Bakhtin studies the interaction between the society and the literary works, by analyzing the Renaissance social system in order to discover the balance between language that was permitted and language that was not, following which he pinpoints two important subtexts: the “carnavalesque” which he describes as a social institution, and grotesque realism which is defined as a literary mode. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together and is characterized by subversion or mockery of authority through crudity, scatological humour, violence and explicit or vulgar insults. The carnival creates the “threshold” situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. In the current paper shopping malls are chosen, in order to compare it with the marketplace festive activities that are presented in Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the medieval carnival.

Shopping mall is a space of display where goods are displayed for maximum visual display in such a fashion that they are attractive enough to instill desire. Spectacle, attention-holding and desire are central

elements of shopping experience in the mall. Hence all emerges primarily as a site of gazing and secondarily as a site of shopping. The mall presents a spectacle of a fantasy world created by the presence of models and posters, compounded by the experience of being surrounded by attractive men and women, cozy families and vibrant youth together entice us to unleash the possibilities of giving a better identity, by trying out or consuming global brands and cosmopolitan fashion. The mall invites participation in the fantasy of future possibilities. Thus, the spectacle turns into a performance that the customer or consumer imitates and participates in. It is also a theatrical performance that is interactive, in which the spectacle comes alive with the potential consumer. The encircling vistas, long-spread balconies and viewing points at every floor add to the spectacle, by providing a "prospect" of shopping. Eclecticism is yet another feature of the mall, where, "the world is under the room". It imparts a kind of cosmopolitan experience to the visitors. Thus eclecticism and a mixing of products, styles and traditions are central features of the mall and consumer experience. That is mall organizes all cultural artifacts including food habits, music, movies, games, shopping and so on:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of foot lights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because it's very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that are the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; It is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival ... (1984: 7)

Bakhtin takes carnivalesque to refer to the carnivalising of normal life. That is there is a sense in which every festival was a miniature carnival because it was an excuse for disorder and because it did, in fact, draw from the same repertoire of traditional forms. Bakhtin, furthermore, sees forms of the carnivalesque emanating beyond the Renaissance carnival into literature, art and everyday life. As Stallybrass and White put it: "the main important of the his study is its broad development of the 'carnivalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies"(1986:7).

Further, the mall is a hyperreal, ahistorical, secure, postmodern-secular, uniform space of escape that takes the streets of the city into itself in a tightly controlled environment where time, weather, season do not matter and where the 'natural' is made through artificial lighting and horticulture, and ensuring that this public space resembles the city but offers more security and choice. Shopping malls are the public spheres offering a better hygienic space for spending leisure time in the contemporary period. In shopping malls, the material culture of Capitalism creates an appearance of variety, a colourful surface, to enjoy the free time well. Shopping malls are the forms of disoriented Capitalism which followed arcades and department stores. Carnivals, world exhibitions, Shopping malls and more recent one water theme parks have been spaces of show and consumption, devoted to pleasure seeking kind of entertainment.

The new shopping mall culture reminds the society of the medieval society's attitude to freedom. In both cases individuals are free to involve in as many dealings as possible. It can be commercial, emotional or even physical and sexual according to the taste of the consumer. The mall secretly provides a mysterious atmosphere which interrogates the limits of privacy. It is an open area without boundaries and not even sufficient walls. The entrance of a shopping mall welcomes people to this open space where they can loiter and engage in a self exhibitionistic experience. They have to forget all the troubles to accept a convenient leisure time. Celebration is the ultimate aim of their artificial living:

Here in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. There for such free familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human

relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. (1984:10)

The shopping affords the opportunity of participation in the currency of contemporary society. Certainly mall provides a form of leisure to the people belong to different strata of the society. Now mall is a public space where all the people choose to spent their time. And they can experience a kind of festival mood in it, without the discrimination based on the caste, class religion and gender. The people are making their identities and experience by participating themselves.

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