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## THE MALL IN MOTION:

### A Narrative Stroll Through the Obstacle Course

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### INTRODUCTION

How does one begin to write about motion, a process, in itself, that is always passing by, slipping away while attempts to capture it are made in words, on a map, or in notes (musical or otherwise)? Spaces of transition, such as hotel lobbies, bus depots, and highways, are difficult to capture, and often impossible to understand without their crucial element of movement. Shopping malls are such a space, and involve multiple levels of movement. As a private space designed to facilitate commercial exchange, there is the necessary fiscal movement of commodities. This in turn requires a second level of motion: the circulation of consumers. The shopping mall cannot be described solely on the basis of its floor plan, location or size; it can only be encountered *in motion*, as a matrix of time and space through which passes a multitude of trajectories. Without the movement of people, the mall itself is dead, not just in the financial sense, but in the spatial sense as well: the mall is incomplete without the crowd. Mirrors reproduce only commodities, floors reflect only muzac, and escalators transport only their own steps. The dependence of the mall on its kinetic component establishes the constitutive role of the crowd.

The crowd in the mall is not an undifferentiated mass, regardless of how subtly the mall attempts to script its space and enforce the imperative to purchase. The "crowd" is a heterogeneous, moving collection of agents with different motivations, and disparate agendas. As such, the constitutive nature of the crowd preserves the potential for social use of a private space which is dedicated to the circulation of commodities and is understood only in motion.

### MODELS OF MOTION: THE BONAVENTURE AND BEAUBOURG

Einstein's theory of relativity suggests that time and space are fused, and are bent under the influence of mass. This presents a potent springboard for the theorization of space, and the role mass (buildings, people, and so on) plays in the creation and reproduction of space. Mikhail Bakhtin, using Einstein's theory as a metaphor, introduces the notion of chronotope -- literally, time space -- to characterize the ways in which novels brought time and space to life with respect to each other. Notions of absolute time and static space are transformed through the concept of the chronotope, the "intersection of axes and

fusion of indicators" (184), in which time takes on spatial qualities and space responds to time.

The notion of the chronotope and its implications for narrative analysis have filtered into architectural theory, where impressions of postmodernity have produced a number of accounts of spaces in movement. Particularly significant for my purposes in this paper are Fredric Jameson's examination of the Bonaventure hotel, and Jean Baudrillard's reflections on the Beaubourg museum.

Jameson describes the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as a space which aspires to be "a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city" (1991, 40). Within this consolidated space, we find a loss of depth, an inability to perceive volume -- a loss noted as a general symptom of postmodern "hyperspace" (118, *passim*). Moving through the space, the crowd engages in a new type of collective movement, described at one point as "milling confusion" (43). A loss of depth raises problems for our traditional modes of perception which have failed to keep pace with the mutations of space, making it difficult to navigate hyperspace.

Escalators and elevators, key cogs in this motion machine, have, for Jameson, become heightened in their function to the point at which they "replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper" (42). Free wandering through the space is curtailed, not only by the walker's inability to orient him or herself, but by the secondary role the walker plays; the escalator has become autoreferential, and the individual, rather than choosing a path, is directed along a designated route. The machine appears to have so perfected its techniques of movement that it no longer requires the *active* energy of the people it moves. This may explain why neither of the photos of the Bonaventure included with the text feature people -- an ironic if not intentional exclusion. Escalators potentially threaten to reduce the constitutive crowd to cargo, although navigational codes such as signs and color-coding tend to mitigate against this. Thus while the mutations of space may have outstripped our ability to make sense of them, the crowd's perceptual limitations still impose and temper the space, defining and modifying the postmodern architectural design.

In the end, however, Jameson is correct in saying that such a machine "does not...represent motion, but...can only be represented *in motion*" (45). This same depiction of space in a state of flux can be found in Baudrillard's "Beaubourg-Effect" essay (1982). As a site of implosion, the Paris museum is translated from a social structure to "a system of surface ventilation" (3). Unlike the circulation of air and coolant, the "circulation of human masses is less assured" (3). Rather than resort to suction and propulsion (as Baudrillard jokingly suggests), the museum uses its structure and cultural stock to produce "a homogeneous flow of men and minds" (8). Thus "the only contents of the Beaubourg are the masses themselves" (7), converted into movement and circulated through this space of simulations -- the space itself becoming a simulacrum -- by the cultural objects within; or in other cases, by merchandise or information, whatever the alibi may be for the particular space.

Baudrillard cites the Beaubourg as the first instance of the supermarketing of culture which, like the supermarketing of merchandise, operates by "*the perfectly circular* function by which anything, no matter what (merchandise, culture, crowds, compressed air), is demonstrated by means of *its own accelerated circulation*" (9). The crowd exists insofar as it is in motion, ensured by the space's systems of circulation.

## **SYSTEMS OF CIRCULATION**

Taking the crowd as constitutive of the mall space, we may move beyond Jameson's assertion that the space can only be represented in motion to say that the mall *only exists in motion*.<sup>1</sup> Without the circulation of consumers, the space ceases to function as a commercial center; moreover, it loses its dynamism and architectonics are reduced to static architecture. This theme, and others salient to the following discussion, are the subject of Margaret Morse's excellent comparison of television, freeways and malls as foci for distraction, in which non-spaces (much like Jameson's hyperspace) become vectors, "a direction rather than a location" (1990, 199). The imperative to move permeates the mall space, and from the perspective of commercial interests, ideally translates into the imperative to purchase. This translation is aided by a system of control and surveillance which reinforces the structural space as an obstacle course. One can examine the mall's systems of circulation in a double sense: the mall space circulates and is circulated by the crowd.

First: the circulation of the crowd involves a number of strategies to direct and control the mall traffic. Like the Bonaventure, many malls resemble miniature cities, self-contained and complete within their boundaries, and founded on a transportation infrastructure. The mall corridors, analogues for the city streets outside, lead the crowd through the 'city.' Malls tend to rely on anchor stores which act as magnets drawing consumers to the mall, including department stores typically located at the ends and intersections, and national franchise stores along the corridors. In between are smaller stores which then try to draw in the passing crowds using window displays, advertising, and so on rather than reputation. As the crowd is in motion, advertising and promotions must be tailored to a distracted mode of perception; it cannot require concentration on the part of the observer in order to capture the eye and the imagination.<sup>2</sup> Thus the crowd is funneled through a kind of obstacle course, pulled by anchor stores in particular directions, and distracted along the way by flashy displays and headline advertising. Even when stopping to purchase, the consumer is still caught in the movement, but at the level of fiscal circulation. Complete stasis is not permitted; one cannot simply sit and concentrate but must move through the store, and through the commodities. Shoe stores, for example, provide seating insofar as it will be used as a part of the movement of the stores' goods.

The stimulation to purchase is ubiquitous. Even the mall's architectural supports are adorned with advertising, depicting goods, services and further distractions available within the mall. The commercial imperative extends not only to the use of the mall by patrons, but also to the identification of individuals within the mall; the transitory inhabitants of the mall are regarded as consumers -- if not as immediate purchasers, then as potential buyers in the future. Thus window shopping produces consumers, if not

immediately, then eventually. Passage through the mall space is a journey made by (potential) consumers; this identity is projected even onto those who use the mall solely as a social space in which to meet, to see and be seen. If the identity cannot be 'made to fit,' then the individual's presence in the mall is no longer sanctioned.

The food court is often the most social area of the mall and acts in a similar fashion to anchor stores. As a large space in which to gather, the food court serves as the simulation of the city square or market; as such it is the conceptual center of the mall regardless of its actual geographical location. The roads to the food court, like those to other attractions, are bordered by distractions. Thus an individual coming to the mall simply to visit the food court (or any specific store for that matter) is often seduced into window shopping. In this way, the chronotopic stretching of space in relation to time becomes apparent. While technically a corridor may be only two hundred meters long, the presence of distractions lengthens the time of travel, thus lengthening the scalar distance as it is transformed into a vector.

Within its private borders, the public atmosphere of the food court brings to light the mall's agenda of circulation. Signs inform patrons of the maximum length of stay "suggested" by the mall. Analogous to minimum speed signs, "no loitering" warnings reflect the threat prolonged stasis (framed as loitering) poses for the commercial success of the mall. People staying still are not people circulating money; consumption *is* circulation. The potential for the mall to serve as a public space is problematized by this equation, which leads to the requirement that 'approved' social activity take place within a framework of commercial interaction. Thus, in order to spend time -- sitting, socializing, resting -- one must first spend money. The purchase of food or beverages then acts as rent for the table or seat in the food court; the lease period is short-lived, however, implicating even the ever-present fast food chains in the mall's systems of circulation.

Benches make up another area of stasis in the mall, and tend to be of two types. The first are small and often uncomfortable, reflecting the mall's policy that prolonged sitting is neither welcoming nor welcomed. The other type of bench or seating structure is large, more comfortable and often located in the middle of the mall's corridors, if their width will accommodate them. These benches, while again subject to the same 'no loitering' policy, provide no respite from the circulation systems. Facing stores and the moving crowd, the bench occupant is still faced with and reminded of the central agenda of the mall. The mall's security officers overtly enforce the no loitering policy, while the crowd itself acts as a "mad convection current" (Baudrillard 1982, 3), pulling and pushing its constituents along.

The second sense of the mall's systems of circulation comes in the role the crowd itself plays in circulating the space. On the commercial level, the crowd is necessary to complete the exchange of commodities; on the spatial level, the crowd completes the space, infusing the mall with kinetic energy. Like cars, a mall is only able to function with drivers, regardless of how full the gas tank may be. Thus the crowd is as constitutive of the mall as its physical structure, if not more so; the crowd transforms the mall into a *setting in motion*.

Part of the attraction of malls as centers of consumption is their social atmosphere; the crowd itself becomes an attraction, completing and expanding the space. The vast majority of windows in the mall face inwards, revealing to those in the corridor the occupants of the stores, so that consumption itself becomes part of the window display. At the same time, the busy corridors are visible to shoppers inside, a reminder of the endless, inexhaustible flow outside.

There tend to be a large number of reflective surfaces in malls, reproducing not only commodities, but the crowd as well. Jameson addressed the "reproductive technology" of reflective surfaces (42); nowhere is this more apparent than on those department store escalators, lined with mirrors to infinitely reproduce a single traveler, who suddenly finds him or herself in familiar company. Far from being inconsequential cargo, the crowd expands the escalator to massive proportions. Mirrors reproduce and recirculate commodities in stores, but also reproduce the crowd as models for and purchasers of those commodities. Moreover, the crowd itself may be considered as part of the commercial goods, sold to and as commodities. As an attraction to would-be merchants and other mall visitors, the crowd parallels the audience, sold by television executives to advertisers. Like mirrors, the hard surfaces preferred for mall flooring serve to reproduce the crowd by reflecting and amplifying the din to a level indicative of thriving commerce, a level then fine-tuned by the acoustically functional ceiling. Again, the crowd completes the space; without it, the surfaces reflect quiet, sterile stasis.

This level of distracted circulation must be carefully maintained within certain limits so that it does not overwhelm people and detract from consumption. Thus the mall requires an ambient backdrop to its busy obstacle course, one which provides a comfortable level of sameness that prevents the crowd from falling into a "milling confusion." Like rooms in international hotel chains, the franchise stores provide an expected and comforting level of sameness to malls from New York City to Thunder Bay, Ontario. This is not to say that all malls look alike. Outside of the sameness of the stores, each mall attempts to create a particular space which secures it in the minds of individuals as a unique and desirable place for social consumption. Waterfalls, plants, amusement rides, architectural design and decorative flourishes all serve to particularize a space which, by and large, contains many of the same stores found in any mall.

While the mall attempts to create itself as a unique place, 'natural' time is suspended, leaving only time marked by the speed of the crowd and the start and stop of the business day. The constant daylight and controlled temperature of the mall remove indications of the passage of the sun or the seasons. Only holiday-specific decorations (and the outerwear of the crowd) suggest the time of year. In fact, the clearest sense of the mall's suspended spatial and temporal environment occurs when one crosses the time-space boundary and reenters the outside world. Facing the unpredictable and often cruel chronotope of the 'real' world once again, one may experience nostalgia for the mall's chronotope -- or even motion sickness from the swift change in velocities!

## THE NARRATIVE STROLL

The mall, as a simulation and miniaturization of the city, demonstrates what Jameson has called "the waning of affect," or the increasing loss of feeling and subjectivity in postmodernity (10, *passim*). While the bustle of the streets may have been transferred to the mall corridors, it has simultaneously been transformed through scripting and regulation. In conceptualizing passages through the mall using narrative analysis, Jameson notes how the Bonaventure "underscored, symbolized, reified and replaced" the narrative stroll with an increasingly narrated stroll, such that individuals are no longer allowed to pursue dynamic paths on their own (42). Contemporary urban spaces are rapidly losing truly public spaces for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is fear caused by increasing urban crime.<sup>3</sup> The shopping mall, as a safe and comfortable climate, is rapidly becoming *the* social space for a large portion of individuals.

One must question, given the commercial agenda of the space, what kind of public space the shopping mall makes available. Even at the level of the composition of the crowd, there are severe limitations at work, trying to produce a demographically homogeneous mass that is best able to fulfill the mall's commercial agenda. Thus, while the mall is in part constituted and completed by the crowd, the crowd is, in itself, selective. The private nature of the mall makes possible the exclusion of canvassers, panhandlers, sidewalk artists, and buskers, an exclusion put into practice and enforced by the mall's security officers who represent the commercial interests of the space, and who serve to keep the machine functioning smoothly. As well, people deemed unsuitable -- generally those unable to purchase now or in the future, and those distracting others from purchasing -- are discouraged (if not barred) from using the mall. What is left is a crowd comprised of those viewed as potential and cooperative consumers, marking a waning of affect through the exclusion of particular individuals and hence particular agendas, creativities, and so forth.

To assert, however, that the mall is monolithic in its regulation of circulation is to grossly underestimate the potential agency of its constituents, and to ignore the fundamental role of the crowd in creating the mall space.

First, the crowd itself preserves the potential for freedom, within limits of course, to pursue the narrative stroll. Baudrillard discusses the role of commodities in mass production, that is, the "production of *the mass(es)*" (8); but this integration of the masses is not wholly successful. The crowd is not a homogeneous and passive mass, duped into believing their sole activity must be purchasing. The crowd, a misleading term insofar as it suggests this homogeneity, is comprised of a multitude of individuals, each with different motivations and agendas. These differences may be slight or drastic, depending on the individual and how well he or she integrates him or herself into the space. To come to the mall with no intention to shop is counter-consumptive and thus makes the non- or anti-consumer a possible target of suspicion, regulation and even expulsion. Thus the individual might present the facade of the consumer, displaying an appropriate appearance through clothing, demeanor or accessories in order to infiltrate and make use

of the space. If one went to the mall with shopping bags already in hand, for example, would not the imperative to buy be assumed already completed?

This addresses only the composition of the crowd, however. Regardless of one's appearance, the policy against loitering still constrains. Here, we see new opportunities for Benjamin's flaneur, "who wandered around the city sampling life in a distracted and unpremeditated form" (Urry 1995, 25). The insertion of individual narration into such a scripted environment may then be a matter of embracing circulation and using it toward creative ends. Of course, all of this still presupposes that the mall can only be used by a person in motion, the official position of the mall authorities. What would happen if an individual resisted the flow, and subjected the mall to a concentrated perception? Would advertising become more seductive, completely ridiculous, boring? We need to consider the tactics of loitering as a curious intersection of stasis and, in order to avoid capture or punishment, movement. By adopting the appearance of a desirable customer, or by renting the food court table with an empty coffee cup, the loiterer is still capitulating to the mall's definitions. There seems to be more creative subversion on the part of those who deliberately refuse to enter the flow, or once in the flow, blatantly abuse the speed limit; but they too have agreed to make the mall the space in which they act, and thus help constitute the crowd.

And what if the entire crowd stopped moving? Then the mall, as a commercial space, would, at least for that instant, cease to exist, and taking its place during that tangential moment in time would be...? It has the potential to be the space as narrated by the crowd; in all likelihood, a diverse collection of points without the central logic that commerce provides, and with more room in which to narrate. These are potentials *because* of the constitutive nature of the crowd, the second 'saving grace' for the mall as social arena.

The mall can only be understood in motion because it only exists -- as a commercial space in which to gather, shop and so on -- in motion; hence the essential element played by the crowd in the creation of the mall space. Through what de Certeau calls "pedestrian speech acts," the walker calls the city into being:

...if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities...and interdictions..., then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. (98)

*If* the individual chooses to seize this opportunity to author the mall as a genre other than commercial, then his or her narrative stroll will reclaim and reshape the mall space to some extent, if only on a highly personal level.

A literal example might be the practice of mall walking which is gaining popularity, especially among seniors, given the safe and comfortable environment of the mall as a place in which to exercise. While "mall walkers" may still be regarded as potential customers, and may have to model their appearance accordingly, they are nonetheless

making their own use of the space. We must recognize that freedom -- of movement or in other sense -- is always bounded; freedom hinges then on the creative play within those limits. To be the flaneur -- the impostor, the loiterer, the poacher -- is to creatively undermine and subvert the mall's systems of circulation, to circulate in different ways, to circulate different meanings and objects.

The actual use of the social milieu, produced by the mall as a marketing device, on the part of individuals presents hope for the preservation of public space in the contemporary urban scene. The constitutive crowd can and does insert narration into the scripted space of the mall, albeit on differing levels of intentionality. "Henceforth, the only true cultural practice, that of the masses as of ourselves (there is no longer any difference), involves the chance, labyrinthine, manipulatory play of signs without meaning" (Baudrillard 1982, 6).

Thus the game before us is to convert the obstacle course of the mall into a kind of maze where one expects to take wrong turns, encounter dead ends, and use creativity and cunning to rewrite the path one chooses to wander against the backdrop of everyday, consumptive life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The role of the walker in bringing the space into existence is discussed by de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and will be taken up in greater detail in the next section of the paper. The notion that such spaces as malls only exist in motion certainly raises the questions of whether or not there can be spaces not in movement, how these would be known, and to what degree a written account, such as this one, can ever hope to capture accurately a space that seems to have as its antithesis a static text. Such questions, while beyond the scope of this paper, cannot help but to inform its findings.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of distracted and concentrated perception was introduced by Benjamin. Things such as buildings, which are viewed in passing, are appreciated in a state of distraction, unlike paintings in a gallery, which are subject to concentrated perception. (Urry 1995, 24).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the end of public space, see Gottdiener, *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life* (1995), particularly "Recapturing the Center: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Shopping Malls," in which he discusses how the few remaining public places are being abandoned out of inconvenience or fear. Also relevant is the collection of essays edited by Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (1992), particularly Boddy's essay "Underground and Overhead: Building the Analogous City".

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