

Mindless Consumption or Hopeful Anarchy?

1980s Slasher Cinema Goes to the Mall

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the formal and thematic significance of the mall in two 1980s slasher films: *Chopping Mall* (1986) and *Phantom of the Mall: Eric's Revenge* (1989). It first reads *Chopping Mall's* story of young adults stalked and killed by security robots inside a mall as centering on a coalescence between "law and order" conservatism, corporate capitalism, and military power in the Reagan era. Although it is critical of this particular coalescence, however, the film does not reject capitalism, but presents the mall as embodying a potentially emancipatory synthesis of youth culture and consumerist capitalism. *Phantom of the Mall* conversely presents an image of the mall as a place of manipulation and control, embodying a corrupt collusion between political power and capital. While the film suggests that this collusion is particularly dangerous to youth, however, its reliance on a highly gendered damsel-in-distress narrative entails that its critical impulses are tempered by a reassertion of cultural conservatism.

Keywords: horror; youth culture; consumerism; capitalism; *Chopping Mall*; *Phantom of the Mall*

INTRODUCTION

Among the plethora of icons that make up the landscape of 1980s North American popular culture, there is perhaps none more easily associated with the excesses and absurdities of late-capitalist consumer society than that of the mall. Following the rapid expansion of suburban populations, and an increased cultural emphasis on consumer spending, the mall became central to the reconfiguration of America's commercial landscape in the 1950s (Cohen 257). Understood by many as embodying a new synthesis of commerce and community, it emerged not only as a symbol of prosperity and progress, but as "the distinctive public space of the postwar period" (Cohen 274). Over time, however, this image faltered and a less favorable one emerged (Cohen 274–78). By the time the mall became a staple of mainstream cinema in the 1980s—featuring prominently in youth-oriented box-office hits such as *Fast Times at Richmond High* (Heckerling, 1982), *Valley Girl* (Coolidge, 1983) and *Weird Science* (Hughes, 1985)—it was frequently an object not only of criticism, but of outright derision, viewed by many as "a reference point for everything wrong in American society" (Howard and Stobart 21).

As a place of mindless consumption, the mall arguably finds its most dystopian cinematic manifestation in the highly influential *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) and the figure of the mall-zombie, forced by base unconscious desire to consume without end or agency (Harper). Reading the mall as a manifestation of excessive consumerism, however, seems almost too easy, and as Bailey points out, there is a different reading possible, even in Romero's darkly grotesque satire. Although it is no doubt presented as a place of conspicuous consumption, *Dawn of the Dead* also suggests that the mall contains some sense of shared purpose for those once-humans who return to it, and the film's critical stance is thus tempered by the articulation of "a more

culturally complex position" from which the mall can be understood as "imbued with personal and social meaning" (Bailey 102).

Writing of the mall more generally, Backes suggests that it holds so central a place in the American imaginary precisely because of its curious double nature as simultaneously a reification of crass consumerism *and* a place addressing a real need for freedom: "[m]alls, for all the calculations of their designs, for all the goals of consumption and profits, are reappropriated by visitors into resistant and generative practices far different from the intention and purpose of the space" (5). As visitors thus "reappropriate the space to satisfy their own purposes in contemporary life," the mall comes to represent "the creation of personal narratives through new forms" (5). Backes thus ultimately argues that malls afford a form of *dislocation* that constitutes not a loss of self to a system of manipulation, but rather a playful release from the strictures of the reigning societal order. Malls in this way give visitors the chance "to invent their own reality, their own history, their own culture, their own future" (12–13). By allowing visitors to "mingle with the culture's iconography," they make possible new modes of experience and forms of thought that can potentially constitute "vivid disruptions of systemic order . . . that create a hopeful anarchy" (14).

In *Reading the Popular* (1997), Fiske similarly confronts two diametrically opposed understandings of the mall. Expressed in metaphorical terms, the mall is both a cathedral in which consumerism constitutes a new religion, as well as "the terrain of guerilla warfare" wherein cultural struggles consistently play out (Fiske 14). Arguing that the mall-as-cathedral metaphor is misleading, however, since it fails to encompass the struggles being fought and the forms of resistance possible, Fiske ultimately suggests that "[s]hopping malls are where the strategy of the

powerful is most vulnerable to the tactical raids of the weak" (18).

Building on this ambivalent understanding of the mall—as a place of both mindless consumption and hopeful anarchy; of religious devotion to consumerism and ideological guerilla warfare—this article investigates two 1980s slasher films featuring malls as central settings: *Chopping Mall* (Wynorski, 1986), and *Phantom of the Mall: Eric's Revenge* (Friedman, 1989).¹ Playing on the title of Fiske's influential book, it explores how these films "read" the mall and discusses the significance of these "readings" in relation to their main thematic interests and concerns. The fact that both films feature young adult protagonists, moreover, is central, and the article focuses to a significant degree on the question of how the films represent the relationship between youth and the malls in which their narratives unfold. A working hypothesis is that the malls in these films can be understood as symbolic representatives (and as literal concretizations) of capitalist popular culture, and that the films in this sense constitute vantage points from which to explore the complicated relationships between youth, popular culture and capitalism in 1980s North America.

Fiske's discussion of youth in relation to the mall is of particular relevance. Although he concentrates primarily on questions concerning gender, arguing that shopping can function as a form of resistance to patriarchy, his discussion of youth foregrounds the mall as a place wherein the continual struggle between youth and the reigning societal order manifests itself with particular intensity. Fiske largely sees this struggle as embodying the possibility of resistance, as he describes the mall as a place in which youths consume "images and space instead of commodities," thereby "asserting their difference within, and different use of, the cathedral of consumerism" (Fiske, *Reading* 17). As youths in this manner exploit their knowledge of

the system in order to resist subjugation by it, they successfully instantiate a form of "oppositional cultural practice" (17). Viewing youth as appropriating the mall itself in order to establish a form of resistance to capitalist authority, Fiske's discussion of youth thus strongly emphasizes its capacity for challenging cultural hegemony.²

In contrast to this image of youth culture, however, others have characterized the mall's relationship to capitalism in more ambiguous terms. Among others, Frank (89–130) argues that youth culture has been a central engine of capitalist consumption since at least the 1960s, not only because of the expansion of the youth demographic that took place at the time, but because youth itself was discursively constructed as a highly desirable identity position to which consumption was key. As Frank suggests, youth in this period "became a consuming position to which all could aspire" (25), and the ideal of youth became a dominant cultural determinant (118). Rather than being defined by age, youth was conceptualized as a feeling, and the experience of "youthfulness," writes Frank, "became as great an element of the marketing picture as youth itself" (25; emphasis in the original). Moreover, the business class harnessed the transgressive impulses of the period's youth-oriented counterculture movements as catalysts of consumption, and in so doing cultivated a particular image of youth as characterized by change, creativity, and transgression as a method of driving up consumption (Frank 27). A new form of youth-oriented consumer capitalism thus emerged in the 1960s, as youth culture effectively became an engine of capitalism's expansion.

Much like the mall, youth culture has thus been subject to varying interpretations. While discussing which interpretation is the more accurate in historical terms falls outside the scope of this article, I will use these contrasting images as an

analytical framework through which to explore the representations of capitalism and youth culture in the films. Undertaking such an exploration within the limited context of the slasher film, furthermore, is particularly interesting because the genre's transition from exploitation subculture to mainstream popularity in the 1980s was closely connected to its increasingly insistent appeal to youth audiences.³ Insofar as the slasher film's mainstream breakthrough was specifically as a youth genre, therefore, its representations of youth—and more generally its ways of speaking to and about youth—are fertile ground for exploring the role of youth within the context of capitalist popular culture more generally.

***Chopping Mall* (1986)**

Adding more than a pinch of science fiction to the traditional slasher recipe, *Chopping Mall* replaces silent, knife-wielding assailants stalking suburban streets and summer camps with high-tech security robots run amok inside a mall. Although previous research—sparse as it is—has understood it primarily as a scathing critique of capitalism, this article argues that the rich satiric undercurrent beneath the film's overtly absurd premise centers more narrowly on a particular historical configuration of political, social, and cultural relations. Rather than an attack on capitalism, or capitalist modernity writ large, as Mann, for instance, argues, *Chopping Mall's* primary target of criticism is the "law and order" conservatism of the Reagan era and its coalescence not only with corporate capitalism, but with a morally suspect idealization of military power. If *Chopping Mall* attacks anything, therefore, it is not capitalism per se, but rather a particular reconfiguration of the relations between political, economic, and military power.

At the time of the film's theatrical release in 1986, the United States had seen a steady

expansion of criminal justice primarily centered on the "law and order" ideology of the so-called New Right, which the Reagan administration heavily endorsed and implemented (Platt 66). Emphasizing tougher punishments and an expansion of police and judicial power, the politics of "law and order" not only dominated political discourses about crime in the 1980s (Platt 67), but the policies implemented by the Reagan administration quickly transformed it into "a growth industry" (Platt 62). One of the key developments resulting from this was a massive expansion of privatized policing, security, and surveillance (Platt 62), as well as the continued growth of a police-industrial complex built upon the appropriation of military technology developed for overseas warfare for the purposes of applying it to "the problems of domestic 'order' in the U.S." (59). At both state and federal levels, the criminal justice system was thus reorganized around a "'military-corporate' model that emphasized technology (in weaponry, communications, and information systems), specialization, and managerial techniques of 'command and control'" (Platt 59).

Chopping Mall's murderous robots serve as both symbolic representatives and literal embodiments of this coalescence of "law and order" conservatism, corporate capitalism, and military power. On the one hand, they are commodities, designed, manufactured, and marketed to mall owners wishing to safeguard their businesses. On the other hand, their capacity for violence (as well as their visual appearance) clearly marks them as weapons of war.⁴ Featuring taser, laser, and tranquilizer guns, as well as a set of powerful pincers and explosives deployment and detonation capabilities, they are designed to patrol the mall in order to ensure through violence the free flow of capital against any disruptions. Insofar as their capacity for violence thus makes possible their commodification in the first place, the robots ultimately embody the commodification of violence itself.

An exposition-centered prologue featuring representatives from the ironically named company Secure-Tronics briefing a group of storeowners about the new robots clearly signals the potential dangers of this particular process. After watching a promotional video in which one of the robots uses extreme violence to foil a jewelry theft, the storeowners are left more than merely perplexed. "What do your machines do? Besides killing criminals?" one of them worriedly asks. When told that the robots do not kill but merely detain people, another responds with disbelief: "I don't know. That guy looked awfully dead to me." In words rendered thoroughly ironic by subsequent events, a Secure-Tronics representative rejects all concerns: "The system is foolproof," he adamantly states. "Absolutely nothing can go wrong."

When lightning strikes the mall, of course, everything goes wrong, as the robots' programming to eliminate any threat to the free flow of capital is set at a hyperbolic pitch, superseding any other concerns and ultimately resulting in the elimination of everyone getting in their way, as well as in the destruction of large sections of the mall itself. As their "law and order" programming in this way becomes antithetical to their intended purpose, *Chopping Mall's* robots come to embody not only a form of regressive conservatism, but a self-destructive militarization of capitalism itself, effectively tracing the complete short-circuiting not merely of the robots, but of the ideological paradigm they represent.

Caught in the middle are the film's main protagonists, a group of six early-twenties youths partying and hanging out in the mall after opening hours. Suddenly finding themselves in the robots' crosshairs, they are forced to defend themselves by any means necessary. Making use of various commodities sold in the mall, they engage the robots not only with automatic assault rifles, shotguns, and handguns, but with a range of improvised explosive devices made with

propane tanks and gasoline canisters in what is essentially a very literal and hyper-violent version of Fiske's metaphorical "guerilla warfare." In order better to understand the significance of this war, however, it is necessary to investigate in further detail not only the young protagonists, but also the mall itself. Key in this regard is the opening credit sequence, which sets the stage for the film's reading of the mall and its relationship to youth culture. It begins with a succession of low-angle wide shots of the exterior and interior of the mall, emphasizing its tremendous size in a manner gesturing strongly toward the mall-as-cathedral metaphor. Following these shots come a variety of crosscut sequences focused on various patrons of the mall. Although a subset of these gestures toward momentary experiences of stress and frustration, the credit sequence predominantly revolves around playfulness and pleasure, generally depicting the mall as a place of freedom and community. Central in this regard is a pronounced focus on the dynamics of adults and children, establishing the mall as a space wherein the traditional distinction between these two identity categories is undone. One sequence, for instance, features an older couple observing a pair of teenagers kissing on a bench. Seemingly encouraged by this youthful display of physical affection, they soon begin kissing as well. Another example features a boy and his father arguing over who gets to play a videogame in the mall arcade, as another male adult exploits their distraction to jump the line and begin playing himself.

Recalling Backes's noting of dislocation, the opening credit sequence in this way depicts the mall as a place centered on a kind of playful release from the rules of adult authority. Even the consumerist imperative is here somewhat sidelined, as many of the people portrayed are not necessarily partaking in any form of consumption, but are merely enjoying themselves. One telling scene depicts a teenager none-too-subtly stealing a vinyl record from a music store by

smuggling it out under his shirt. Clearly comedic in tone, the scene suggests that within the context of the mall, such seemingly anti-consumerist behavior does not constitute a serious moral crime, but is rather a form of harmless youthful transgression.

Even allowing for a slight note of irony undercutting the celebratory tone, the sequence still presents an overwhelmingly positive image of mall life, and the moments of frustration and stress intermittently suggesting a sense of irony all relate specifically to adults struggling to fit in and keep up. Although it is ironic to some extent, therefore, the scene predominantly directs its ironic impulses not toward mall life as such, but rather toward out-of-place adults. Although some shades of grey do exist, therefore, the mall is depicted as a place of playful freedom and pleasure, wherein youth culture—not capitalist consumerism—reigns supreme. Indeed, the opening credit sequence presents the dissolution of existing hierarchies and distinctions in a distinctly celebratory fashion, and thus ultimately codes as positive the kind of playful transgressions on display.

Strengthening further this reading of the mall is the film's portrayal of its main young adult characters. Although most of them work in the mall, it is not primarily a place of business to them, but rather a place for socializing and maintaining friendships, and thus for establishing a community and building an identity. A scene introducing the film's main protagonist, Allison, and her friend Suzie clearly illustrates this. Although they are in the middle of working as waiters in an Italian restaurant, with an increasingly irate boss barking orders at them, they are focused primarily on their own conversation regarding a party planned for later that night. Although they are ostensibly presented as workers within the capitalist space of the mall, their youth identity allows them to resist this hierarchical class position, as work becomes a kind of distraction from

what is really important and meaningful. In a similar manner, the introduction of the characters Greg, Mike, and Ferdy, who all work together in a furniture store, also suggests their priorities. When Ferdy interrupts the planning of the coming party because he cannot locate a fuchsia-patterned drape for an elderly customer, Greg's response is unmistakable: "It's Friday! Fuck the fuchsias! Tell the old bag to wait!" Rather than a place centered on the exchange of services and commodities for money, the young protagonists understand and use the mall primarily as a place for leisure activities. Their status as workers seems to matter very little as their youthful disregard for the rules governing the cultural economy in which they participate effectively effaces any notion of class difference or subjugation. Revolving largely around hanging out and having fun, moreover, their party is arguably the most obvious example of how the consumerist spaces of the mall are appropriated by a youth culture not necessarily interested in consumption. Instead, the mall is a foundationally social place wherein the building of a community becomes possible. It is not a manipulative engine of consumerist desire or worker exploitation, but rather a place in which young people can fashion a community of meaning, forming new identities through play and pleasure.

In this manner *Chopping Mall* establishes a kind of symbiotic relationship between the consumerist spaces of the mall and contemporary youth culture. Working as a metonymy of American capitalist consumer society, the mall arguably represents a version thereof wholly centered on the playful and creative transgressions of youth. This is further emphasized by the fact that the only two young adults not employed at the mall, newlyweds Rick and Leslie, are business owners who have used their wedding money to start an auto repair shop. Their first on-screen appearance is in the mall parking lot, where they are having trouble with their car. When Rick fails to

fix the car, Leslie steps in and does it instead, signaling not only that youth culture is not entirely beholden to the gendered norms of the adult community, but also that their business is centered around their personal talents and interests, rather than being purely transactional.

Hardly representatives of anti-capitalist sentiments, all of the young protagonists in *Chopping Mall* thus embody a creative and productive coalescence of capitalism and youth culture through which the differences between consumption, work, and capital are essentially dissolved. Rather than offering a class-conscious critique of capitalism in general, as Mann has argued, *Chopping Mall* presents two opposing versions of capitalism in order to disavow one while championing the other. In general terms, it juxtaposes a form of consumer capitalism in which the marketplace is driven by the demands, interests, and creative impulses of youth culture with a form of corporate capitalism in which the marketplace is instead dominated by corporations ideologically aligned with a culturally and socially regressive "law and order" conservatism. It is decidedly not the case, as Taylor argues in her brief mention of the film, that the mall is a place of "cleverly masked horror and unseen violence" with the robots working to reveal "the real horrors and carnage of consumption" (320). Instead, the robots function as a kind of invasion by "law and order" conservatism of the ideal capitalist space of the mall.

As both an allegorical and a literal confrontation between two ideological paradigms, the violent battle between the robots and the young adults is one of the key ways *Chopping Mall* articulates its rejection of Regan-era conservatism while simultaneously championing youth-oriented consumer capitalism. Because of this, it is worth exploring in further detail the characteristics of the violence through which it unfolds. When first confronted by the robots, whose all-out laser-attack almost completely disintegrates the

furniture store in which the party is being held, the young adults attempt to avoid violence by escaping the mall. Realizing that new security doors installed at all exits make this impossible, however, they opt for direct confrontation with weapons and explosives. This proves less than successful, however, and ultimately results in Suzie burning to death when a Molotov cocktail devised by Leslie is blown up by one of the robots. Following this tragedy, they successfully set a trap for one of the robots by luring it into an elevator and then blowing it up with propane tanks. When their subsequent attempt to sabotage the main computer controlling the robots results in Greg's death, however, they once again attempt to avoid violent confrontation by hiding and waiting to be rescued. It does not take long, however, before the robots flush them out. Once again forced into a confrontation, they try a strategy of deception, setting a trap using an array of store mannequins and mirrors in order to confuse the robots. Although this does result in the destruction of another robot, both Rick and Linda die in the process. Following Ferdy's incapacitation, Allison is then ultimately left to confront the last remaining robot on her own. She defeats it by once again employing a form of deception, luring the robot into a paint shop and then blowing it up by igniting copious amounts of paint thinner with an emergency flare.

In this manner *Chopping Mall* depicts two diametrically opposed types of violence. While the robots' militarized violence ultimately serves to enforce a radically destructive "law and order" ideology detrimental to human society, the violence perpetrated by the young community is instead portrayed as emancipatory, that is, as being in the defense of human freedom. Centrally, the young adults consistently fail when they attempt to mirror the robots' violence, but conversely they succeed to some degree (but not necessarily without cost) by thinking creatively. More specifically, their particular form of

creativity here revolves around appropriating the artefacts and spaces of consumerist capitalism. If the mall is a carefully designed machine ultimately geared towards the facilitation of consumption, *Chopping Mall's* young adults creatively repurpose a variety of its moving parts for their own emancipatory purposes. In metaphorical terms, therefore, their battle against the robots implicitly traces a confrontation between a destructive and regressive "law and order" ideology, on the one hand, and a creative, adaptive, and ultimately emancipatory appropriation of the material manifestations of consumer capitalism, on the other.

Arguably, this might constitute a form of what Fiske calls "excorporation," meaning, "the process by which the powerless steal elements of the dominant culture and use them in their own, often oppositional or subversive interests" ("The Popular" 510). It is worth noting, however, that their creativity does not rely on a rejection of capitalism, but rather on the creative use of its material manifestations. Ultimately, therefore, the young adults embody a creative coalescence between the transgressive creativity of youth culture and capitalism, and *Chopping Mall* in this way further strengthens the moral superiority of the youth community and its implicit alliance with consumer capitalism. Indeed, the film offers not merely a coalescence of youth and capitalism, but presents the latter as a naturalized extension of human creativity.

Although it is critical of the particular form of corporate capitalism dominant in the Reagan era, therefore, *Chopping Mall* does not offer an anti-capitalist alternative or attempt to imagine any possible modes of existence or experience outside capitalism. Instead, it rejects as morally corrupt one particular form of capitalism in order to affirm and naturalize another. Rather than being an anti-capitalist parable, therefore, *Chopping Mall* is a profoundly pro-capitalist parable whose rejection of the coalition between

corporate capitalism, regressive conservatism, and military power dominant in the Reagan era serves as the foundation for its primary strategy of ideological interpellation, namely the complete colonization by capitalism of youth culture. *Chopping Mall's* critical impulses, therefore, do not mark it as significantly aberrant from Andrew Britton's famous notion of "Reaganite entertainment." Although it resists the effacement of cultural engagement and the affirmation of militarized patriarchy ascribed by Britton to that particular cinematic movement, *Chopping Mall's* critique of the coalescence of political power and cultural conservatism only constitutes a slight readjustment of the terms of its ideological commitments. Indeed, *Chopping Mall's* insistence on the primacy of capitalist consumption as a natural extension of human creativity ultimately works to "recoup a longing for change and transformation in the interest of the status quo" (140).

Chopping Mall tellingly ends with an ascending wide shot of Allison and Ferdy embracing joyously in the mall atrium as the morning sun casts beams of light down upon them, suggesting not only that the symbiosis between youth culture and capitalism has been successfully reinstated as the reigning societal order, but even implying a sense of transcendence. With the two having engaged the robots in a dialectical struggle between antithetical ideological orders, the stage is now set for the ascendancy of the winner. Indeed, as the mall once again becomes a celebrated cathedral of consumerism with youth at its center, it seems almost as if the camera itself, and by extension the film's authorial system, becomes an engine of its ascendance. The final shot thus inscribes not only the film's idealization of youth-oriented consumer capitalism, but also its mode of ideological interpellation.

***Phantom of the Mall: Eric's Revenge* (1989)**

As its title suggests, *Phantom of the Mall: Eric's Revenge* is based (very loosely) on Gaston Leroux's worldwide bestselling novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910). Instead of a nineteenth-century opera house, however, its titular character stalks a newly opened twentieth-century suburban mall, seeking revenge on the cynical real estate developers and corrupt politicians who burned down his childhood home, killed his parents, and left him for dead in order to build said mall. Despite severe facial burns, he still hopes to regain the affections of his former girlfriend, Melody, whose life he saved in the fire. She now works in the mall, and, like everyone else, she has no idea that Eric is still alive, nor does she know that the mall's owner and general manager, as well as the town mayor, are ultimately responsible for his tragic fate. As Eric begins exacting his bloody revenge, however, Melody and her friends soon come to suspect not only that Eric may still be alive, but that something sinister lurks behind the glittering glamour of the mall itself.

As this plot outline may suggest, *Phantom of the Mall* presents a much more ambivalent reading of the mall than the one found in *Chopping Mall*. Whereas the latter film idealized the mall as embodying a creative coalescence of youth culture and consumer capitalism, marred by the violently militarized "law and order" ideology of the murderous robots, *Phantom of the Mall* instead confronts the viewer with a bleaker reading of the mall as a place of calculated manipulation and control. Despite the fact that its production and release occurred at a time when the "law and order" ideology of the New Right arguably became even more politically prominent with the George H. W. Bush administration (Rostron 386–87), the film is not really interested in this particular historical discourse, nor in its political implications. Unlike *Chopping Mall's* attack on a historically specific configuration of relations

and discourses, therefore, *Phantom of the Mall's* thematic interests concern anxieties related to capitalist modernity more generally, and its reading of the mall centers primarily on a morally corrupt collusion between capital and political power.

A key component of the film's more pessimistic reading of the mall is that its plot revolves around a conflict not between a young community and a violent killer, but rather between a young community, of which the killer is tangentially a member, and a corrupt and repressive system of power both metaphorically and literally embodied in the mall. Besides refashioning some of the basic narrative features of the traditional slasher formula, much of the film's camerawork also serves to underscore the ambivalent characteristics of the mall. Generally avoiding the metaphorical mall-as-cathedral imagery so prominent in *Chopping Mall's* opening credit sequence, *Phantom of the Mall* predominantly places the visual splendor of the mall in the background, often imbuing even its more expansive spaces with a sense of confinement and restriction. Throughout the film, there is a pronounced absence of panning or tracking wide shots, and the mall is most often shown in static medium-wide shots of individual stores or floors. Both the architectural features of the mall as well as the cinematic frame itself are in this way used to create a sense of restriction and stasis. Instead of the expansive and open spaces typically associated with mall design, there is something distinctly constrictive and confined about the image of the mall established here. Rarely is the viewer given a real sense of its scope and scale. Even in one of the film's key action scenes, during which a mall security guard chases one of the young adult protagonists from the first floor down to the ground floor and across the atrium, there is a distinct lack of wide shots, with most shots being static or slightly panning medium wide shots. In a brief wide shot of the elevator descending toward the first floor,

half of the frame is tellingly obscured by a tree crowding the foreground, imbuing even this shot with a sense of restriction. Insofar as the film leans towards the traditional imagery of the mall-as-cathedral metaphor, which it does only very sparingly, it does so in a way that simultaneously obstructs it.

Consequently, the celebratory tone that dominated *Chopping Mall's* image of youth-centered "mall life" is here largely absent, or, alternatively, is presented as a form of misdirection arbitrated by morally suspect characters. A clear example of this is the opening ceremony that follows the opening credit sequence. "We have finally succeeded in putting Midwood on the map!" says the mayor of the small town in which the mall has been built to a crowd of enthusiastic mall customers. "Today we have a new town center!" she continues. "We have new jobs!" Contrasted with these positive remarks, through which the mall is presented as a new place of community and prosperity, multiple shots from Eric's point of view instead foreground the mall as a place of foreboding darkness. Hiding in the complicated system of air ducts that regulate the mall's temperature, he secretly looks in through ventilation grids on the festivities from a space beyond the brightly lit avenues of consumption that make up the mall. Indeed, the only wide shot of the ceremony is from Eric's perspective, and is therefore obstructed by a ventilation grid.

If *Chopping Mall* began by presenting an idealized image of the mall, therefore, *Phantom of the Mall* instead begins by rendering this image more than tangentially suspect. Even more than its deconstruction of the traditional mall-as-cathedral imagery, this more ambivalent reading of the mall is articulated by the contrast between the ostensibly bright and rationalized spaces of consumer capitalism and the spaces beyond, as a significant part of the film's narrative unfolds not in the mall proper, but in the staff changing rooms and storage rooms, the ventilation ducts

and airshafts, as well as other restricted areas where mall customers are not meant to venture, but which nevertheless underpin their consumerist activities. Here is where the Phantom primarily roams, moving unseen through the mall's "backstage" spaces in order to stalk and kill his victims while intermittently placing explosives at key points as part of his ultimate plan to blow up the mall. Much in keeping with its literary origins, the mall is here at least partly if not predominantly presented as a dark and labyrinthine space, a Gothic space rather than the carefully designed and rationalized space of consumption traditionally associated with mall design. Indeed, a central stylistic feature of the film is the coalescence of these two spaces, as one bleeds into the other with the Phantom functioning as an engine of their dissolution.

One of the key ways through which the film thus rejects the idealized image of the mall is by its inclusion of what mall design has historically worked to efface. In order to become a realm centered entirely on consumption, argues Friedberg, the mall must effectively "exile the realm of production from sight" (113). In this manner, the mall works through the careful exclusion of the social and political space in which it is situated. Friedberg writes,

the mall is "imagineered" with maintenance and management techniques, keeping invisible the delivery bays or support systems, concealing the security guards and bouncers who control its entrances. The mall is a contemporary phantasmagoria, enforcing a blindness to a range of urban blights—the homeless, beggars, crime, traffic, even weather. . . . The mall creates a nostalgic image of the town center as a clean, safe, and legible place, but a peculiarly timeless place. (113)

In *Phantom of the Mall*, Eric ultimately comes to serve as an embodiment of all that is excluded

and repressed by the mall's consumerist spectacle, and his reign of terror ultimately works to bring it to the surface. A central feature of the film is its insistent transgression of the border between the visible and the invisible, and the revelation of the dark, manipulative forces beyond what is made readily available to perception in the mall proper. In both narrative and formal terms, particularly by way of its camerawork, *Phantom of the Mall* insistently rejects the phantasmagoric machinations of the mall as well as its production of ahistorical nostalgia. It insistently situates the mall within history, and Eric's revenge is in this sense a way of returning history and time to a place built upon its effacement.

Mirroring this more critical reading of the mall, *Phantom of the Mall* also rejects entirely the idealization of the youth-capitalism synthesis found in *Chopping Mall*, and consequently refashions the way in which the young characters relate to the mall itself. While the latter film celebrated the mall as an almost utopian space outside the rules of everyday life, providing both youths and adults with a form of escapist fun, *Phantom of the Mall* instead reveals this discourse of escapism as a cynical and insidious form of ideological manipulation. Returning to the previously mentioned ceremony opening the film, the mall owner and manager articulates a suspect combination of convenience and control by appealing directly to a specifically parental fantasy of escape: "Midwood, your time has come! No more shopping in the rain! No more trucking 45 miles to the Southern Mall! No thank you! No more 'Saturday night and where are my kids?'" He even emphasizes the final point by the addition of a faux sense of personal investment. "And on a personal note, as a beloved parent, it gives me great personal pleasure to share with you this, our wonderful mall!" Through these words, the film's primary antagonist presents the mall not only as a place of community and care, but also as a kind of haven within the town

itself, protected not just from bad weather and traffic, but from the drudgery of everyday urban living—including the burden of parenting.

Much of the film's remaining narrative centers on the insistent unmasking of this illusion, as the mall is established as a place not just of manipulation and control, but of (often sexualized) exploitation wherein no one—particularly children and young adults—is safe. Revealed early on, for instance, is the fact that the mall security guards use the surveillance cameras to spy on women in the store changing rooms, among which are both Melody and her friend Suzie. Suzie is also sexually harassed not just by the mall owner's son, but also by one of the security guards. Even more seriously, Melody becomes the victim of an attempted rape in the mall parking lot, where she is attacked by a mysterious figure later revealed as a mall employee. And then there is the mall manager and owner himself, who not only cynically covers up the deaths of several guards and maintenance workers, but who is also perfectly willing to have Melody and her friends killed in order to safeguard his business. When it comes to murder, furthermore, a subset of the security guards is both directly and indirectly involved in either carrying it out or covering it up, further emphasizing the moral rot confronting the young adult protagonists. Even setting aside these examples of explicitly criminal behavior, the mall is still not a place to be trusted even in regard to its supposed function within a free market economy, as one of Melody's friends discovers subliminal messages hidden in the music playing at the mall encouraging consumption beyond means.

Wherever one looks, or listens, the mall is a place of dangerous and potentially deadly deceptions, embodying a wholly corrupted system that not only Eric, but all of the youths must ultimately resist. In order to understand the thematic significance of this conflict, however, it is necessary to investigate in further detail the particular

characteristics of Eric's revenge and the form it takes. As I discussed previously, *Chopping Mall's* young protagonists defeat the robots through the creative appropriation of the material manifestations of capitalist culture. If their particular form of excorporation, however, was only partly subversive, Eric's is more foundationally so, as he performs a kind of creative and deadly appropriation not just of various commodities within the mall, but of other artefacts and features that are part of its daily operations. A security guard is killed with an arrow from a sporting goods store, for example, while a maintenance worker is killed by having his head pushed into a ventilation fan. In other instances, Eric utilizes a garbage disposal machine, an escalator, and a weed burner to kill his victims, and in what is the film's most overtly comedic moment, he kills the mall employee who attacked Melody with the help of a cobra stolen from a pet store. When he finally confronts the mayor, moreover, he throws her out of a fourth-floor window and down into the atrium, essentially utilizing the scale and scope of the mall itself as means of exacting his revenge. Incidentally, this is one of only three instances in which the film's camerawork clearly emphasizes the scale of the mall, tinging this traditionally idealizing imagery with a hint of irony that becomes quite literal when the mayor lands on a miniature model of the mall and is impaled on one of its towers.

Another significant example of Eric's method of excorporation is his use of the mall's surveillance cameras as a means of stalking his victims and keeping an eye on Melody. Having hacked into the security system, he has installed a large video wall using television monitors in his underground lair. Seemingly able to follow any action anywhere inside the mall, these technological extensions make him almost omnipresent. Careful consideration of much of the imagery seen on these monitors, furthermore, even suggests that a large portion of the footage has been obtained not with mounted surveillance cameras,

but with a handheld camera. Although this might be written off as some kind of production misstep, or alternatively have been done for comedic purposes, it also implicitly underscores the camera's function as an extension of Eric's point of view. He *is* the camera in these instances, which suggests a dissolution of distinction between Eric himself and the mall surveillance system. In this manner, Eric's revenge is realized by way of a series of creative appropriations of various commodities and artefacts integral to the daily operations of the mall, and by extension to the operations of consumer capitalism. This particular modus operandi is clearly signaled even in the film's opening scenes, which depict Eric fashioning the Phantom's trademark mask out of a store mannequin's face.

Although it is subversive to some degree, however, Eric's violence is ultimately established as morally suspect. While his murders of various mall security guards and employees are legitimized to some extent by the film's portrayal of them as wholly corrupt, and even as perpetrators of sexualized violence, his murder of a seemingly innocent maintenance worker is more than a little questionable. Most obviously, however, Eric's endeavor to protect Melody from harm is ultimately rendered morally suspect through his inability to accept her choice not to resume their romantic relationship. It is made clear that Eric wants primarily to possess and control Melody, and he becomes angry when she rejects his advances, vowing to kill both himself and her in the planned explosion. If the mall, and by extension consumer capitalism, is especially dangerous to young women, which the film clearly suggests, Eric seems decidedly unable to resist, but rather reproduces and affirms this particular cultural logic, and his strategy of appropriation therefore becomes a means of control and violence rather than of emancipation. As such, the film not only calls attention to the larger cultural problem of sexualized violence against women, but also suggests its amorphous

and ubiquitous nature, as it is perpetrated not only by the amoral and/or indifferent adherents to a system of capitalist exploitation, but also by those whose actions may ostensibly appear as heroic emancipation.

Ultimately, therefore, Melody's friends must rescue her from Eric before they can expose the rot and corruption of the mall itself. Interestingly, they do so by mimicking his strategy of appropriation when they trick their way into the mall security office and use the surveillance cameras to locate Melody and Eric. Even before this incident, a similar pattern is evident when the characters Peter and Buzz use the surveillance cameras to identify one of the mall security guards as being responsible for burning down Eric's home. Peter is generally established as the primary catalyst of resistance, and as a particularly central character in regard to the foregrounding of emancipatory forms of resistance linked to visual technologies otherwise associated with control and dominance. Unlike the other young adult protagonists, Peter is not employed at the mall, but works as a journalist for a local newspaper. When he is first introduced, he appears predominantly to be a mouthpiece for the mayor, taking pictures of her public appearances and thus participating in her calculated image-production. As the narrative progresses, however, he becomes instrumental in exposing the criminal behavior of both the mayor and the mall manager, and is established as a symbolic representative of a form of critical journalism serving to hold political power and capital responsible to the public. In a telling scene, Peter covertly follows a security guard in an attempt to ascertain his identity, photographing him with the help of a ceiling-mounted security mirror, literally turning the mall's system of surveillance into an extension of the camera's investigatory gaze. Another scene sees him blinding one of the villains with the camera's flash in order to enable himself and Melody to escape danger. In general, his use of photography to resist the

dangerous forces of the mall and uncover the crimes of the past is a central engine of narrative progression. In this manner, he arguably represents a form of critical image production with which the film's authorial system implicitly aligns itself.

If the robots in *Chopping Mall* represented a morally suspect utilization of technology, Peter's use of photography in *Phantom of the Mall* conversely represent its opposite, that is, a use of technology that is ultimately emancipatory. Contrasted with Eric's morally suspect strategy of ex-corporation, Peter's use of photography is established a superior method of resistance to the corrupt collusion of capital and political power. Eric's strategy of ex-corporation is thus rendered morally suspect and contrasted with a more legitimate and emancipatory form of resistance embodied in the other young adult characters. Both, however, essentially rely on the same strategy of resistance through the creative re-appropriation of the spaces and commodities of consumerism.

Phantom of the Mall thus rejects entirely *Chopping Mall's* idealized image of a union between capitalism and youth culture, instead suggesting that youth culture needs to resist capitalism and its dangerous machinations through its own forms of emancipatory creativity. Whereas *Chopping Mall's* idealization of the union between youth culture and capitalism entails the effacement of class difference, furthermore, *Phantom of the Mall* not only explicates but expands upon this theme. As Fhlainn argues, many 1980s slasher films explored class issues via their depictions of lower- or working-class killers stalking and attacking middle-class teenagers, essentially centering their narratives on the violent consequences of the disenfranchisement of the working class. *Phantom of the Mall*, however, offers a killer victimized despite his middle-class background, suggesting that even the privileged members of the middle class—who otherwise

might be expected to survive and perhaps even thrive in a capitalist consumer economy—can easily become the victims of the corrupt collusion between capital and politics.

Thus even while it has a more critical view of capitalist modernity in general, suggesting a separation of political and capital power as foundational to human freedom, its critical impulses are at least somewhat undermined by its reliance on the highly gendered damsel-in-distress narrative to which it ultimately reverts. As the film ends with the mall exploding and the four young protagonists contemplating the rubble, Melody remarks: "I guess Eric finally got what he wanted." Peter smiles and kisses her. "But I got something better. I got you." With a final shot that lingers on the seemingly dead Eric laying in the ruins of the mall, the film foregrounds the dire consequences of a struggle for freedom that affirms rather than rejects the violence of the reigning ideological order. It simultaneously suggests, however, that the emancipation rendered possible through resistance is ultimately meaningful not because it serves a community, but because it makes possible the romantic union between the triumphant hero and the rescued damsel. Rather than suggesting a sense of "hopeful anarchy," therefore, *Phantom of the Mall* ultimately tempers its critique of capitalism with the reaffirmation of a highly gendered form of cultural conservatism. This is congruent with much slasher film research, which has argued that while the genre contains impulses challenging patriarchal gender norms—particularly its emphasis on female agency and its strategies of cross-gender identification (Clover)—it nonetheless struggles to entirely reject or subvert heterosexist hegemony (Rieser). Although it is slightly less overt, *Chopping Mall's* celebration of youth culture follows a similarly gendered pattern as its closing ascension is underscored by the happy union of Allison and Ferdy, whose meeting as each other's blind dates ends with the distinct possibility of future romance. Even while

acknowledging that *Chopping Mall* inverts the trope reiterated by *Phantom of the Mall*—here the girl "gets" the guy, rather than the other way around—the triumphant victory of youth is still clearly gendered in adherence to the strictures of capitalist patriarchy.

Conclusion

Much in accordance with their target audience, both *Chopping Mall* and *Phantom of the Mall: Eric's Revenge* champion youth culture, emphasizing the strength of community in resisting the reigning hierarchies of power. Their particular form of rhetorical address is thus highly compatible with their function as commodities within a particular system of cultural consumption centered on youth as the target demographic. Whereas *Chopping Mall* safely inscribes this community of youth within a capitalist framework, however, *Phantom of the Mall* instead suggests a more foundational rejection of capitalism. It does so, however, by invoking a socially and culturally regressive form of conservatism.

As I argued above, *Chopping Mall* rejects not capitalism in general, but the specific coalescence of corporate capitalism, regressive conservatism, and military power that characterized the Reagan era. Conversely, it champions an idealized, safely gendered and essentially classless coalescence of youth culture and capitalism. Despite its critique of cultural conservatism and its insistence that contemporary horrors cannot be divorced from the social conditions under which they emerge, it may therefore ultimately be characterized as participating in the particular form of ideology production associated with other forms of "Reaganite entertainment" of the era—slightly adjusting its strategies of interpellation in order to reaffirm its political commitments. This is to say that *Chopping Mall*, even while it is critical of Reaganite conservatism and its idealization of corporate capitalism,

ultimately suggests that youth culture must resist the former in order to refashion and reaffirm the latter. *Phantom of the Mall* instead rejects capitalism in much more general terms as being incompatible with a truly egalitarian and democratic community. While *Chopping Mall's* ideological attack is fierce, it is historically specific, clearly contained, and ultimately tempered by its simultaneous affirmation of capitalism as a natural extension of human creativity. One might think of the film as rejecting the conservative ideology of the Reagan era while instead championing the transgressive energy of the youth-oriented counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It does so, however, by safely inscribing the creative transgressions of that cultural moment within a thoroughly capitalistic culture. Similarly, *Phantom of the Mall's* attack on capitalism—despite its foregrounding of issues concerning class and gender—is paired with a discourse of socially regressive conservatism. Ultimately, therefore, the critical energies of both films are tempered by strategies which render them more or less ideologically safe for mainstream consumption. Despite their critical and potentially subversive impulses, these films thus paradoxically offer what might be described as a commodification not only of youth culture, but of the ideals of transgressive resistance and emancipation often associated with it. It is, of course, possible that audiences may embrace the former while rejecting the latter. Such are the choices before us when 1980s slasher cinema goes to the mall.

Notes

1. Both films were shot in the Sherman Oaks Galleria in Los Angeles. Several North American slasher films utilize retail environments. *The Initiation* (Stewart, 1984), for instance, is partly set in a wholesale market center; *Hide and Go Shriek* (Schoolnik, 1986) in a furniture store; and *Intruder* (Spiegel, 1989) in a grocery store. To my knowledge, however, *Chopping Mall* and *Phantom of The Mall* are the only North American slasher films set in malls proper.

2. In this regard, his analysis is generally compatible with much Cultural Studies research on youth culture emphasizing its capacity for resistance rather than affirmation. For more, see Cambell (1–30).

3. On this point, see Shary (60–220); Nowell; and Bernard.

4. Mann makes this point as well, arguing that the robot “more closely resembles a weapon of war than a living organism. It is squat, angular, and painted a metallic black with a single line of red running the length of its inhuman head. It moves on the kind of caterpillar tracks traditionally associated with armored vehicles” (98).

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