



Steven L. Shepherd

Mall Culture

Some time ago, I had one of those thoughts so simple as to be embarrassing. Still, it has stuck with me.

It occurred to me while driving through Los Angeles in summertime, through mile after mile of store after store, sign after sign, mall after mall. Perhaps it was the heat or the idleness of mind wrought by the relentless assault, but somewhere along the way I thought: What if you could do magic? What if you could suddenly give everyone everything they wanted? What, that is, if you could do away with the wanting? With the wanting of new cars, new clothes, new CDs, new stereos, new appliances and amusements, new gadgets and gizmos—with the ceaseless, endless torment of stuff? What if you could give everyone what he or she wanted, make everyone content and end the wanting? What would happen?

The answer, of course, is simple: life as we know it would end. Without the wanting, there would be no malls, no factories or design studios working feverishly to replace one hot item with the next, none of the associated jobs. Except for the producers and purveyors of necessities, the economy would stop. Which means, in turn, that contemporary American culture is based on unsatisfied want—on unhappiness, really. People have to be unhappy for our way of life to continue. For if we didn't ceaselessly want new things, there would be little to sell or cart about.

Depressing though it is, this is not an unfamiliar concept to some people. I first realized this upon hearing the editor of a women's fashion magazine interviewed on the radio. "Why," she was asked, "don't your models look like your readers? Why not foster a definition of beauty that most women could meet? Wouldn't your readers be happier if they weren't encouraged to aspire to physiques they will never have?"

"Yes," she replied. "But then we would have no advertisers because our readers wouldn't need their help to be beautiful."

The true business of her magazine, the editor understood, was the manufacture of desire—of unending discontent with one's present circumstances. If the magazine's readers were to believe they could be beautiful without the advertisers' products, the readers would have no need for the advertisers, and the advertisers none for the magazine. Therefore, the readers must be kept unhappy, always in quest of a goal that must always be kept out of reach.

I was reminded of all this recently when my son, then twelve, was invited to "go to the mall." This meant joining a small group of similarly aged young people that would converge with other convening groups into an amoeboid mass that would then roam the corridors and concourses for hours. Occasionally, the mass would stop before a storefront and gawk at the window display. Occasionally, it would send in an emissary to make a small purchase. Occasionally, it would surge into a fast food outlet. Often it would giggle. Perhaps it would visit a theater to watch a few hours of death and disfigurement.

Recently, the trend-setting Mall of America in Minneapolis, Minnesota, imposed a curfew on teenagers unaccompanied by parents. More generally, I am told that shopkeepers profess annoyance at the hordes of roving kids outside their windows. But I do not believe this. I do not believe the protestations are real. Or, if they are, I believe the shopkeepers are shortsighted in their irritation. For the malls are the temples of our culture, and going to the mall is in truth an initiation rite. The shopkeepers should be glad about this behavior because, as the children gaze through the windows at the well-stocked shelves

within, they are learning to want, learning to ache for things supplied by others and of which there can never be enough.

My immediate inclination to my son's request ("Dad, can I go to the mall?") was to say, "No." But my wife said that she, too, had gone to the malls when she was young and that it had merely been a safe place she and her friends could go—a place to socialize without the tyranny of parental oversight. Other parents said it offered a benign environment for prepubescent "boy-girl stuff," our version of the *corso*—the street or square where young Italians gather and stroll for the purpose of being seen.

Certainly, for social creatures such as ourselves, these are important functions. But why does it have to happen at the mall? There are myriad other venues and activities at which young people can meet and practice the skills of *Homo teenageus*. There are sporting events, both participatory and spectator. There are parks and museums. There is the beach. There are clubs and societies. There are volunteer organizations (help teach a young child to read or work to clean a littered piece of landscape). But, of course, none of these suggestions has the lure, glitter, or ease of the mall.

I will grant that the mall is safe, that kids need time away from parents, that they need a place to be together. So why then do I object to my son's going to the mall? Why does his request evoke in me such visceral opposition?

In part because an activity that affords safety is not of itself innocuous. It can, for instance, displace more valuable activities. When I was growing up, my father used to tell my siblings and me to turn off the television and find something to entertain ourselves—read a book, play in the yard, play with a friend, daydream. Do anything, but do it of your own initiative, generate it from

within. Because if you provide for yourself from within you will never be bored, never be lonely, never need rely on the amusements of others.

But now, when I say these words to my son, they sound as anachronistic as if I'd told him to hitch up the horse. For our culture today has no use for reflection, for solitude, for that which you can provide for yourself—for a rich inner life. These are things that cannot be sold, and they are antithetical to a society that sees people primarily as customers or market share.

Just as important, going to the mall is part of a long and many-pronged courtship, part of the relentless and powerful seduction of our children by that portion of our culture that accords human beings no more value than the contents of their wallets. It is part of the initiation into a life of wanting that can never be sated, of material desires that will never be satisfied, of slaving to buy and to have, of a life predicated upon unhappiness and discontent.

And why would I want that for anyone, much less my son? 
