Architecture as consumer space

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The thought of Merleau-Ponty, Silverman, Marx and Marcuse is a valuable repository of insights that may function as guidelines for ascertaining what would count as truly 'human' space – that is, a space that does not alienate one from being human. Close attention is given to certain aspects of the work of each of these thinkers with a view to delineating the structure of what is to count as such a human space in all its variegatedness. Such spatial alienation could occur in various ways, such as through the space of apartheid, of prisoner-of-war camps, of monodimensional functionalism, and so on. The argument of this paper is that consumer capitalist space, too, tends to impoverish multi-dimensional human space, even to reduce it to one of alienation. The film, *Dawn of the Dead*, is used to demonstrate how this kind of reductive space turns people into 'consumers' or zombies, with special attention to the 'shopping mall'. A different, more 'human' kind of shopping space, interwoven with qualitatively different spatial possibilities, is conceivable, however, and in conclusion, this is explored by examining the architectural work of Erik Grobler, against the backdrop of the philosophers' work that frames the discussion.
Key words: Merleau-Ponty, Silverman, Marx, Marcuse, mono-dimensional, exchange value, consumer capitalism, shopping mall.

Die denke van Merleau-Ponty, Silverman, Marx en Marcuse is waardevol vir sover dit riglyne verskaf vir die vasstelling van wat as waarlik 'menslike' ruimte sal geld – met ander woorde, ruimte wat 'n mens nie van jou menswees vervreem nie. Daar word noukeurig aandag geskenk aan sekere aspekte van hierdie denkers se werk met die oog daarop om die aard en struktuur bloot te lê van 'menslike' ruimte in al die geskakeerdheid daarvan. Sodanige ruimtelike vervreemding kan op verskeie maniere plaasvind, soos deur die ruimte van apartheid, van gevangenekampe en van monodimensionele funksionalisme. Die argument in hierdie artikel is dat verbruiker-kapitalistiese ruimte eweneens geneig is om multidimensionele, 'menslike' ruimte te verarm en tot een van vervreemding te reduseer. Daar word kortliks aan die film, *Dawn of the Dead*, veral die plek van die winkelkompleks daarin, aandag gegee om te illustreer hoe hierdie soort reduktiewe ruimte mense in 'verbruikers' of zombies verander. 'n Ander, meer menslike sort winkelruimte is egter voorstelbaar – een wat geïntegreer is met kwalitatief-verskillende ruimtelike moontlikhede, en ten slotte word laasgenoemde ondersoek met verwysing na die argitektoniese werk van Erik Grobler, teen die agtergrond van die filosofiese denke wat hierdie bespreking gerig het.
Sleutelwoorde: Merleau-Ponty, Silverman, Marx, Marcuse, monodimensioneel, uitruilwaarde, verbruikers-kapitalisme, winkelkompleks.

It [painting] gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a 'muscular sense' in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the 'visual givens', opens up a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 166.)

The epigraph from Merleau-Ponty's work, above, eloquently captures humans' sensory sensitivity to the multi-layered, textural Being of the experiential world, especially as far as vision is concerned, and then, moreover, especially to the degree in which painting is able to give voluminous flesh, as it were, to ordinary vision. But is ordinary vision not capable, by itself, to do justice to this multidimensionality of the sensory world, one may wonder. Merleau-Ponty gives us a clue to an answer, I believe, where he claims that the 'discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae' of the Being-texture opened up by the hungry vision embodied in painting. Painting, in other words, seems, according to him, to be capable of rendering a concentrated, and at the same time texturally variegated, cross-section of the sensible world – one which ordinarily seems to escape our eyes because of the way that our 'interested' engagement with the world routinely blocks out some of its visual aspects and highlights mainly those that are pertinent to our pragmatic or our libidinally motivated purposes. In painting those layers of potential sensory meaning which are usually screened out, return in rich visual, virtually obtruding, textures, inviting the eyes of viewers to take them in – as Merleau-Ponty suggests, hungrily – as if to compensate for their usually fugitive visual behaviour by allowing these always latently visual volumes to reveal themselves anew in a medium that facilitates their appreciation.

It is not only painting that is capable of such dislocating renewal of vision, however. I would argue that architecture's peculiar modulation of space into qualitatively differentiated spaces and places of sojourn, of repose, of intimate love, of celebration, of public display, of athletic competition – the list goes on and on – has a similar power to lift into visibility, if not synaesthetic experience, certain experiential attributes of things and materials. Conversely, it seems to me that a certain kind of architectural modulation, organization, or perhaps rather (as Heidegger might say) 'ordering' of space, is capable of suppressing precisely those rich spatial textures that other, kinder architectures accentuate, resulting in an attenuated, reductive spatial experience which registers, not merely in the sphere of vision, but – as all spatial experience does – on the body in its entirety. This could happen, for instance, through the space of apartheid or of prisoner-of-war camps.[1]

Not only Merleau-Ponty's rich phenomenological thought, but the thought of several other philosophers contributes to an understanding of the part played by vision in the experience of different kinds of architectural space. The first of these, Kaja Silverman – who is a philosopher as well as psychoanalytical theorist – reminds one with great insight that vision, unlike language, is highly individual and particular, and – most importantly, given the argument of this paper – that it is the source of endowing the concrete, sensory world with value. Her reading of Plato as a foil for her own thinking uncovers Plato's ambiguous metaphysical devaluation of the sensory world (in several of his dialogues) with immense subtlety,[2] and serves to highlight the astonishing (almost shocking) extent to which Western thought and cultural practices have been influenced by this derogation of especially the realm of the visible in favour of the suprasensible or intelligible realm of the so-called platonic Forms. Against this she argues that, while Plato systematically 'deindividuates' vision in order to establish the suprasensible as the locus of value, matters should be understood in exactly the opposite way; she even refers to several instances in Plato's own texts where, despite his valorization of the intelligible at the cost of the concrete world of perception, he seems to acknowledge that looking at the world of the senses is accompanied by an irreplaceable pleasure (2000: 10). Referring to the moment, in Plato's *Symposium*, where the lover beholds a completely disembodied, atemporal 'beauty', in the process conforming to the character of this abstraction, she says (Silverman 2000: 10):

> This deindividuation of the look represents a crucial feature of the process through which Socrates negates phenomenal forms. This is because it is in the *particularity* of the human eye that its transfigurative properties reside. It is only by assuming its utmost 'ownness' that the look can make the world shine – only by becoming *itself* that it can deliver other creatures and things into *their* Being.

I shall return to this emphasis on the particularity of the look, but first I should point out that it is not only via a Platonic, idealist route that a devaluation of the world of sensory experience is effected. I want to argue that it also happens via the reduction of the variegatedness of the world by consumerist imperatives. Marx is invaluable in helping one understand this. In a discussion of money as a 'symbol of alienation in capitalist society' (in the *Grundrisse*; Marx 1972: 59), he remarks:

> The definition of the product as exchange value necessarily entails that the exchange value leads a separate existence, severed from the product. This exchange value which is severed from the commodity and yet is itself a commodity is – *money*. All the properties of the commodity viewed as exchange value appear as an object distinct from it; they exist in the social form of money, quite separate from their natural form of existence.

To appreciate the radicality of the transformation in socio-economic relations expressed in these terms by Marx, one has to recall that the value of the 'natural product' (as he calls it), or its 'use value', is something that depends upon and issues more or less 'directly' from the properties of the product (for instance a knife or ceramic crockery). What changes with the introduction of 'exchange value' – expressed 'abstractly' or quantitatively in terms of monetary

value – is that a medium is invented which serves as a kind of common denominator into which all 'products' or artefacts, but eventually also all services, all resources (human as well as natural), personal skills, capacities and abilities, and – significantly, given the theme of this paper – also all experiential spatial modulations, can be 'translated' or converted. Money is the Midas touch of the social and natural world, in other words, and whatever is touched by it, turns into proverbial gold; at the loss, of course, of its original 'life' or 'natural' properties. This is even more apparent from Marx's observation, that (1972: 60):

> The more production is shaped in such a way that every producer depends on the exchange value of his commodities, i.e. the more the product really becomes an exchange value, and exchange value becomes the direct object of production, the more must *money relationships* develop, as also the contradictions inherent in this money relationship, in the relation of the product to itself as money.

Is it not possible to think of architectural space of a certain kind – say, that of a shopping mall – in these terms? Shopping malls may then be read as architectural-spatial manifestations of what Marx alleges here regarding products 'becoming' exchange value, as well as the 'direct object of production'. This observation is bound to seem counter-intuitive. Think of it this way: if a product, for instance a cellular phone, is said to 'become an exchange value' (and 'the direct object of production'), it is another way of saying that remarks heard in advertisements pertaining to the 'age' of certain models of phone ('Your phone is so last year!') embody this ostensible identity between the product and exchange value. In other words, the phone is not judged in terms of its functionality or use value, which may still be excellent, but from the perspective of the question concerning its present exchange value, which is visually inscribed, as it were, in its very physical, perceptible appearance. In this sense the phone has 'become an exchange value'.

But how does this translate into architectural space? It is well known that shopping malls are designed and 'signed' in such a way as to give optimal visual exposure to the brand names of the stores represented there (Woolworths, Edgars, Game, etc.), as well as to the products displayed in shop windows. These products are invariably those comprising the latest fashions in clothes, or the state-of-the-art technological gadgets, and the prices displayed on them are competitive – so much so that the way in which consumers look at them is determined precisely by their exchange value, and not predominantly by their use value. This becomes especially clear in the case of goods advertised as being on 'sales' of various kinds, when the products' exchange value is highlighted to attract potential buyers' attention. One could go further and say that the architectural space at a mall, with numerous shops and stores adjacent to one another, differs in a decisive qualitative manner from other kinds of spaces – that of a symphony hall, of an art museum, the domestic space of a private house, and so on – regardless of the different products sold in different stores, it establishes a continuum of consumer space or, to put it differently, of spatial homogeneity representing exchange value in its generalized form. From the moment one enters the mall, your eyes are guided, almost coerced, into looking with a view to discerning products (clothes, electronic goods, etc.) as 'exchange values'. This is as true of those goods which constitute 'bargains' at a sale, for example, as for products at the other, 'upmarket' end of the scale, which attract consumers who can match their (the products') exchange value with corresponding sums of money. In a nutshell: from the moment people enter a mall, their behaviour as consumers is dictated by the mall space being presented as a metonymy of exchange value. And this means that this space is intimately connected with money relations, to the detriment of the particularity of every product displayed there, as well as the particularity of the look on the part of every person who enters this space.

Marx was clearly very sensitive to the ambivalence of the effect of money, as embodiment of exchange value, on the nature (character) of products: a product (a dress, a suit) is simultaneously

something that has a material, social use, and also no longer that, but exchange value itself. This explains why consumers so easily become bored with products which are still in perfectly good working order (use value), but 'so last year', so out of fashion, because just looking at them confirms to the consumer that its value – that is, its exchange value – has declined dramatically because a new fashion, or model, is available on the market. In other words, the product becomes, in Marx's idiom, 'alienated' from itself. But it does not end there. He goes on to discuss the implications of this process for individuals (Marx 1972: 66):

> The mutual and universal dependence of individuals who remain indifferent to one another constitutes the social network that binds them together. This social coherence is expressed in *exchange value*, in which alone each individual's activity or his product becomes an activity or a product for him. He has to produce a general product: *exchange value* or – in its isolated, individualised form – *money*. On the other hand the power that each individual exercises over others' activity or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange values, money. Thus both his power over society and his association with it is carried in his pocket. Whatever the individual form in which activity occurs, and whatever the particular characteristics of the product of activity, they are *exchange value*, that is, a general factor in which all individuality and particularity is denied and suppressed…
> The social character of activity, and the social form of the product, as well as the share of the individual in production, are here opposed to individuals as something alien and material…The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a condition of living for each individual and the link between them, seems to them to be something alien and independent, like a thing.

In exchange value, the social relations of individuals have become transformed into the social connections of material things; personal power has changed into material power.

What may be inferred, for the theme of consumer-architectural space, from this elaboration on the social alienation-effect of exchange value (concretized as money) on individuals, corroborates the earlier impression concerning the covering-up of the particularity of products displayed in mall-space, this time in relation to individuals entering that space. To the degree that the mall-space in question is the architectural embodiment of exchange value (as indicated earlier), individuals entering it are alienated from their own individuality or particularity (which is 'denied and suppressed') – these are the terms and conditions of being a consumer. Small wonder, then, that mall-space is conducive to – if not coercive of – typical consumer behaviour: whether one visits a mall for so-called 'window-shopping' (a particularly pitiful manifestation of powerlessness in an exchange-value oriented or money-driven society), or with the purpose of shopping and buying commodities, your behaviour is determined by the exchange-value organization of its architectural space.

In Herbert Marcuse's rather neglected text, *One dimensional man* (1966), this analysis of the process through which consumer space – as concretized in a shopping mall – works reductively to erase the particularistic richness of experiential, specifically visual, space, is given striking confirmation. Broadly speaking, *One dimensional man* is a sustained interpretive analysis and critique of the 'advanced industrial society' around the time of the Cold War. Marcuse explains how social and discursive processes of this era have tended to paralyse all enlightened criticism aimed at uncovering the grounds of then current ideological obfuscation and the historical alternatives to the socio-economic and political system at the time, resulting in what he calls the 'closing of the universe of discourse'. Under the heading, 'The language of total administration', he describes the situation in terms which readily lend themselves to adaptation along the spatial axes of architectural design (1966: 85-86):

> This sort of well-being [of the technological, affluent society], the productive superstructure over the unhappy base of society, permeates the 'media' which mediate between the masters and their dependents [*sic*]. Its publicity agents shape the universe of communication in which the one-dimensional behavior expresses itself. Its language testifies to identification and unification, to the systematic promotion of positive thinking and doing, to the concerted attack on transcendent, critical notions…

…The elements of autonomy, discovery, demonstration, and critique recede before designation, assertion, and imitation…Discourse is deprived of the mediations which are the stages of the process of cognition and cognitive evaluation. The concepts which comprehend the facts and thereby transcend the facts are losing their authentic linguistic representation. Without these mediations, language tends to express and promote the immediate identification of reason and fact, truth and established truth, essence and existence, the thing and its function.

> These identifications, which appear as a feature of operationalism, reappear as features of discourse in social behavior. Here functionalization of language helps to repel non-conformist elements from the structure and movement of speech.

The one-dimensionality referred to in this excerpt by Marcuse corresponds with the homogenizing effect of exchange value, as elaborated on by Marx earlier on, the difference being that Marcuse has transposed it to the register of discourse – that is, the cratological (or power-effects) dimension of language. Identification and unification are the hallmarks of this domain of discourse which repels all discursive varieties which tend to question its presuppositions and justifications. Hence the functionalization of language – those terms and vocabularies which may be shown to have a clearly defined (operational) function within the encompassing system of 'liberal democratic capitalism' are developed and encouraged, and all those linguistically embodied concepts that tend to suggest or allude to alternative universes of discourse, are censored, or – at the level of repressive tolerance – assimilated into the art or book industry where their potentially disruptive working-through of society can be neutralized, if necessary by valorizing their 'artistic' or 'literary' qualities, by proclaiming such works as 'hits' or 'best-sellers'. In short, Marcuse unmasks the so-called 'free world' (in particular America) as the society which has most successfully disguised its own ideological straitjacket in the fashionable clothes of freedom and democracy. It is not difficult to draw the implications of this diagnosis for the architecture which best represents such operationalism or functionalism in Marcuse's specific sense of the term, namely the shopping mall. In fact, in the context of a discussion of the 'institutionalized (repressive) desublimation' – that is, the reversal of the process termed (by Freud) 'sublimation', or transmutation of libidinal energy into cultural creativity – of industrial society by way of, among other things, 'sexual freedom' as a market value, Marcuse comments in a manner directly pertinent to the theme of this article (1966: 74):

> Without ceasing to be an instrument of labor, the body is allowed to exhibit its sexual features in the everyday work world and in work relations…The sexy office and sales girls, the handsome, virile junior executive and floor walker are highly marketable commodities…
> Functionalism, going artistic, promotes this trend. Shops and offices open themselves through huge glass windows and expose their personnel; inside, high counters and non-transparent partitions are coming down.

Is it at all necessary to draw attention to the consonance between this description and the earlier claim, made via Marx's concepts of exchange value and alienation? Whether it is in the shape of office personnel or sales assistants, everything that is distinctly particular about the person (man or woman) has been sacrificed at the altar of 'functional' capitalism: even the unabashedly sexualized body, in its sexy designer clothes, has to serve the interests of capital and consumption, that is, of the profit motive. The person is no more; only the functionary of capital exists in this context. Correspondingly, the space where this function is discharged, is similarly stripped of all distractingly dissonant features (such as a windowless, ostensibly barricaded façade inside the mall, incongruously juxtaposed with the large, open, transparent display-windows of 'normal' stores). Just as discourse in the closed linguistic universe of Marcuse's one-dimensional society promotes the identification of reason and fact, the visual-spatial features of the shopping mall promote the identification of space and spatial possibility, with the result that the visual and spatial heterogeneity usually so characteristic of the world

of the senses – in a flower-garden, a forest, on a beach, a mountain; even in the post-party untidiness of one's lounge, dining room and bedroom the next morning. The one-dimensionality of shopping malls, like consumer-society discourse deprived of critical-cognitive mediation, is immune to critique, because neither has room for the concepts or the spatial heterogeneity requisite for the introduction of salutary visual or spatial differences. Their 'space' is full, crammed with functional, operational spatial coordinates and consumerist visual markers. This is why there are seldom any seating facilities to be seen in shopping malls – it is not in the interest of capitalism to provide seating for consumers. The latter have to be kept moving, looking at merchandise, shopping, buying. Sitting equals unproductive loitering, and clutters the otherwise homogeneous, consumption-functional space.

There are other potential threats to the unadulterated consumer space of the shopping mall too, of course. Imagine encountering, in the insulated passages of a shopping mall, homeless people around every corner, lying on the tiled surfaces or under rickety lean-to shelters in dirty, smelly clothes, drinking brandy and chatting to one another – probably not for long, before security personnel evict them. Would their presence offend consumers' sensibilities? Without a doubt, I would think, except for the odd charitable being among them, who might try her or his level best to come to the vagrants' rescue (in vain, of course). Why would this be the case? Because such homeless people or their makeshift shelters would clash gratingly with the visual and spatial idiom (or lack of it) defining shopping malls. Not only would their presence not be functional in the mono-dimensional terms of consumer space, but their very visual being would resist the vampiric lure of exchange value – homelessness is anathema to exchange value.

This is an appropriate place to return to the particularity of the look, as analyzed by Kaja Silverman. After all, it should be apparent by now that the reductive, homogenizing visual strategies encountered in a shopping mall do not make room for either the irrepressibly particular look of the individual subject, or the irreducible particularity of the visual objects of the lookers' perceiving looks, that is, the products on display. Lest it not be completely clear what is at stake in the deprivation of both the individual look and the product involved of such irreducible particularity, Silverman's further development of the implications of looking at things in the world of the senses enables one to elaborate. She enlists (2000: 23) Heidegger's suggestion that 'being-in-the-world' is inalienable from human beings, and points to the illuminating paradox, that this is simultaneously a universal human state of being *and* an extremely particular state of affairs, as emphasized in Heidegger's choice of word for the individual human being, namely *Dasein* – 'there-being', which means, she observes, that 'Each human being occupies a specific *da*, or "there"…' She interprets this (2000: 23), in psychoanalytic language, as an indication '…that the "there" from which each of us looks is finally semiotic; it represents the unique language of desire through which it is given to the subject to symbolize the world'. Moreover – and this is of extreme significance for the theme of this paper – she also reminds one of what Hannah Arendt says she learned from Augustine, namely that the identity of a person can only be determined by ascertaining what the object of his or her desire is.[3] This, Silverman contends, confirms that 'essence' has to be conceptualized 'in a profoundly nonessential way' (2000: 24).

In other words, what we as (individual) humans are, must somehow be understood in a de-centred manner (an insight variously articulated by different thinkers apart from Augustine, including Husserl, Freud, Heidegger and Lacan) and this has important consequences for especially the visual aspect of consumer space in so far as it appears within the visual field of the subject. If human identity is rooted in what is 'outside' the subject, in what can be desired as such, the less axiologically variegated the visual space before one is, and the more homogeneous it is in terms of (exchange) value, the more one's (an individual's) distinctive, particular position

in the world is likely to be reduced to a kind of generalized, hardly distinguishable consumerist trajectory among other, similar ones. Put differently: space homogenized by the visual markers of exchange value tends to erase individual differences among individuals because individual desire is converted to a 'common currency' of what is desirable.

It is not merely the singularity of the individual's look at the visible world that is of importance here, however. Correlative to this singularity there is what Silverman (2000: 25) calls 'a *plurality* of looks', which she persuasively uncovers in Plato's parable of the cave, namely as belonging to the prisoners in the cave (representing, for Plato, the human condition in the sensory world). Every prisoner, in other words, is only distinctive in comparison with other prisoners, so that the singularity of each is a function of the collectivity of lookers. For Plato (in Book 7 of the *Republic*), of course – it will be remembered – it is the prisoner who escapes from the cave to discover the sunlight outside, who encounters 'truth' (*rational* truth which is, ironically, represented by the light of the sun – something *sensorily* apprehended), while those shackled inside are subject to shadows or illusion. It is not difficult to realize, though, that the very situation that he depicts as one of imprisonment in the realm of the senses, is actually a very revealing quasi-phenomenology of the human condition of finitude, singularity and plurality which is inseparable from embodied human sentiency. And as Silverman (2000: 25-26) shows so convincingly, it is of no small consequence that, as depicted by Plato in the image of people imprisoned in a cave and looking at shadows on the wall before them, the world (represented by the shadows on the cave wall) is seen from a plurality of perspectives. Not only does it mean that the every distinctive look supplements every other look in some or other way, illuminating things from various perspectives, but (2000: 26):

It is also crucial for the functioning of the look itself that there be other looks. As long as we view a being from a single standpoint, even when that standpoint is our very own, we cannot help but substantialize it. In order to release a creature or thing into its Being, we must apprehend it in its perspectival diversity…What is crucial…is that each of us comes to understand our look in its specificity and partialness.

The same may be said of the things or objects comprising the markers in the visual field before one. Recall the epigraph from Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of this paper – the French thinker's words evoke the way that painting opens one's eyes for the 'texture of Being' in the visual field; a texture, moreover, which is irreducibly part of the visible world. To expand somewhat on this, one may turn to his essay, *Signs* (1964a) – specifically the essay, 'Indirect language and the voices of silence' (1964a: 39-83) – where he remarks (p.49) that what he describes as 'free perception', grants objects in the visual field heterogeneity, simultaneity and ambiguity as far as their size is concerned, in place of a 'peaceful coexistence' that is the case when converted to a homogeneous scale of sizes through the practice, in painting, of imposing (the convention of) 'perspective' on them. Prior to the construction of a 'perspectival' representation of these objects, they compete with one another as rivals for the attention of the looker (perceiver) in the 'living perceptual field'.

This insight on Merleau-Ponty's part conveys a profound sense of the function of perceptual ambiguity – and not merely in visual, perceptual terms, I would add, but (as suggested by the 'competition' among visible things for one's attention, as well as by the distinctiveness of each person's look) crucially in axiological terms. But what happens in the consumer space of the shopping mall? All this visual, axiological heterogeneity is forcibly subjected to the homogenizing function of exchange value – everything that one sees there, potentially with the exception of such incongruities as homeless people, is subjected to the procrustean device of foregrounding its exchange value, concretized in monetary terms as its 'price'. Hence, both the looking subject and object looked at tend to be stripped of their heterogeneous, distinctive

being, in the place of which a blanket or continuum of quantified 'value' – like a pervasive, inescapable gas – settles on them. And through the haze of this gas everything – no matter how much advertising and window-display try to hide this fact – somehow looks the same. Instead of one's desire for something being attuned to its distinctiveness, therefore, as Silverman suggests is the case (in ordinary 'human' space), consumers' desire is colonized, perverted by exchange value, as if by the bite of a vampire, which drains the victim's blood and assimilates her or his being to that of the undead. Small wonder that, in its extreme form, this assimilation of humans' being-human to the homogenizing medium of exchange value assumes the guise of individuals deliberately 'branding' and 'marketing' themselves, evidently accompanied by a blindness to the concomitant loss of their distinctive, irreducible humanity.

It should come as no surprise that the connection, hinted at above, between the realm of the 'undead' and consumer capitalism has been thematized in the realm of cinema. In the film, *Dawn of the Dead* (2004),[4] the homogenizing function of consumer-capitalism is given horrific metaphoric visual incarnation, in the guise of the repulsive zombies that emerge, inexplicably (except for the vague suggestion that their condition is caused by a 'virus' of sorts) and irresistibly, apparently from nowhere, to attack people in their homes, in the streets and even in shopping malls – if they can get in. In fact, a shopping mall – appropriately named the Crossroads Shopping Mall, suggesting that humanity finds itself at a point of decision, or defining moment, in its history – forms the locus for most of the action in the film narrative, being the apparently fortified space where the handful of survivors of the initial onslaught by the zombies retreat to, only to be besieged by hundreds (if not thousands) of the undead, milling about outside the mall.

One may ask what it is that compels one to see in the zombies the metonymic embodiments of consumers impelled to behave, once they have been 'bitten', in an utterly predictable, monodimensional fashion, and not simply cinematic creations designed to horrify cinemagoers as much as possible. From this perspective, the fact that this is a 'zombie' film merits some attention. The terms denotes, as said before, the 'undead' – or, as one of the characters who finds temporary refuge in the mall says, beings who are 'dead-ish'. Zombies literally 'consume' living people, not only killing them in the process, but transmuting them into something else (more zombies), which behaves *as if* it is alive, but which lacks the defining characteristics of the living, such as being relatively self-directed, being able to distinguish between actions that must be prioritized and those which can wait, and so on. In contrast, a zombie is possessed by only one craving, namely to 'consume' the living members of the human race. Jeff Collins's (1996: 21) remark, that 'Zombies are cinematic inscriptions of the failure of the "life/death" opposition' sums it up well, and already reveals why one is led to see in them the embodiments of consumers. Add to this the name of the mall – Crossroads Shopping Mall, referred to earlier – with its implication of a turning point, as well as the fact that those characters hiding from the zombies in the mall start behaving like typical consumers at a certain point in the narrative (trying on clothes, trying out gym equipment, and so on), together with the tell-tale gathering of zombies on the open space next to the mall, as if they sense that this is where they 'belong', and it becomes difficult *not* to interpret the figure of 'the zombie' in this film as representing 'the consumer'. The logic of this interpretation seems compelling to me, and casts the 'consumer' in a very revealing axiological light in so far as the multi-facetted nature of one's distinctive, partial 'look' at things makes way, in the zombie, for a 'one-track look', bent on *consumption* (in the film, literally) at all costs, which aptly symbolizes the reductive, one-dimensional functioning of exchange value.

The obvious question that arises here, is whether one is inescapably at the mercy of the reductive conversion of multivalent, heterogeneous, truly human space *á la* Merleau-Ponty into

homogeneous, monodimensional, inhuman ('undead') consumer space in every location where human beings engage in economic activities known collectively as shopping in the present, consumer-capitalism dominated era. How, if at all possible, does one 'shop' without becoming a zombie, without 'exchanging' one's humanity for mindless, 'un-dead' consumption? The first answer (pertaining to the subject) is, of course, that even in the type of consumer space analysed here – the typical shopping mall – one is not *necessarily* ineluctably reduced to a zombie-consumer; as poststructuralists have argued convincingly, one may be (on the one hand) 'spoken by discourse', but (on the other hand) one also has the ability as a human subject, 'to speak', in this way positioning oneself in relation to those linguistically and iconically discursive sources of subjectivity-'construction' as someone who is, paradoxically, both heteronomous *and* autonomous.[5] In brief: a discourse-deterministic conception of human beings is not tenable. At the same time I have to admit that my personal observation of people at shopping malls, as well as my experience in conversation with students, has persuaded me that it is only the exceptional individuals among people who avail themselves of the subject-position available to them (as indeed to all people), namely that position from where they self-consciously, selectively and critically traverse those discursive and iconic domains which tend to 'consume' the subjectivity of the majority of people (the 'consumers').

The second answer (pertaining to the spatiotemporal, 'exterior' realm) to the above question is also negative: not all places where shopping is or may be done, *necessarily* have to be of the reductive, spatially homogeneous, dehumanising type. As an example of a shopping space which is heterogeneously structured, into which 'other' spaces 'flow', or with which it intersects, a design by Erik Grobler, a final-year architecture student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (in Port Elizabeth, South Africa) in 2007, may be adduced.

The design should be seen against the backdrop of Grobler's admission (2007: 3) that, historically, cities became bigger in a 'fragmented and disconnected' way, to the point where the outskirts of the city and its centre (which increasingly played a smaller role in the lives of people on the city's edges) could no longer relate meaningfully in spatial terms. Hence, according to him, the need for the construction of 'shopping centres' in suburban areas. 'The shopping centre, as a private development', he says (2007: 3), 'has thus become the civic space of society. It is not only a place to shop but to be'. Grobler quotes Van Eeden and Du Preez (2007: 3), to the effect that evidence suggests shopping malls, today, to be '…the major public spaces where…people interact, form their identities and make sense of the world'.

Indeed! And as my earlier analysis of the space of shopping malls suggests, these identities are fatally shaped in axiological terms by an ideology (or discourse) which is responsible for reducing the variegated (use-) values of things, as well as the corresponding heterogeneous life-space in which they exist, to one pervasive (non-) value-system, namely that of exchange-value, better known as capitalism. The result is, as I have argued, that things and people are experienced as resources – optimally as branded objects and (in-) 'human' resources. Small wonder, therefore, that Grobler admits (2007: 3) '…most shopping centres' being '…driven by commerce with little regard for their function as a centre of public life'. He then quotes (2007: 3) Thomas Hine approvingly, where the latter points out that there is '…no reason… why a shopping centre can't both be a pleasant place to linger and an efficient place to shop'. Regarding the question of whether the phrase, 'a pleasant place to linger' could conceivably apply to the typical shopping mall referred to in my preceding analysis, it should be clear that the answer must be negative, given the fact that 'lingering' is not encouraged – active shopping is; 'lingering' is unproductive for consumer capitalism! Hence, it seems that Hine is blissfully unaware of juxtaposing incompatible concepts in the quote, above.

Given the direction in which Grobler's argument (and more importantly, his design of a 'shopping centre') then develops, however, it is clear that he has made an attempt to conceive of a *different* kind of 'shopping centre', one which would, precisely, overcome the invidious alienating effects of what I have termed 'shopping malls'. Hine's statement is actually used by him as a justification for the alternative that he (Grobler) proposes. As it turns out, the 'shopping centre' designed by Grobler is a refreshingly inventive modulation (in a simultaneously 'new' and 'old' fashion) of space into place, which is, qualitatively, a far cry from the customary 'shopping mall', with its 'enclosed', homogeneous consumer space. He states as his intention (2007: 66) '…some degree of intervention in the urban fabric to achieve an integrated node and the merging of public and private space'. The latter distinction bears on his design, which envisages civic buildings (a library and a town hall) and the shopping centre to be juxtaposed in one integrated, nodal space, and to be integrated, in turn, in the surrounding suburban context. Grobler also points out (2007: 66) that it is '…important to have a mutual relationship [between public and private space] that minimises boundaries', and intimates that the relation he aims to establish for 'commerce' (note the ambiguity) between private and public space is modelled on '…the traditional street diagram'.

From the above it should already be apparent that the design proposed by Grobler eschews some of the most alienating aspects of the typical shopping mall. Unlike the latter architectural monstrosity spawned by capitalism, it does not set up a boundary between outside and inside – a boundary in the guise of the shopping mall 'entrance' and enclosing corridors, which limits (if not prohibits) interaction between 'private' (in the sense of 'private, capitalist enterprise') and public space, thus relegating the interior as exhaustively as possible to the spatial status of exchange value, with its concomitant reductive, alienating properties (pointed out earlier). Instead – as can be seen in the accompanying picture of the design model – there is free interaction between the public buildings and those accommodating the variously sized shops. Such interaction is promoted by a 'green' pedestrian walkway that takes pedestrians into the 'heart' of the 'node' comprising these heterogeneous, yet connected buildings. This 'green' walkway is envisaged by Grobler (see Design Diagram in treatise; page not numbered) as being 'lined with trees', so that the 'green area around the centre' imparts to it a 'park-like quality'. Unlike the typical shopping mall discussed earlier, the projected shopping centre *cum* public space does not have any '…internal corridors but shops fronting on communal external space that connects to [*sic*] the surrounding area', so that one would enter both public and 'private' (commercial) buildings 'from the same communal space'. Grobler also foresees the buildings in question to be no taller than three storeys, so that a 'human relation' between ground and top floor may be maintained.

This design by Erik Grobler, while being nothing 'spectacular', offers the promise of a variegated, heterogeneous space that would resist the reductive, homogeneous, monodimensional space of the standard shopping mall. Unlike the latter, it would allow the people who enter it from the surrounding residential area to experience the space in question as being qualitatively varied, and as a result their shopping activities are unlikely to occur in a space where they experience themselves as being exhaustively constituted as zombie-like 'consumers'. Not only are public or civic spaces here juxtaposed with commercial spaces, but there is a free flow of spatial interaction between these two kinds of spaces and residential space surrounding the node as designed, in this way further ameliorating the invidious effects of reducing heterogeneous, 'human' space to the impersonality of a space bearing the imprint of 'exchange value'. In such a heterogeneous space, what Silverman calls the 'particularity of the look' could flourish, instead of falling prey to the standard, standardizing look of consumption. With architects like Erik Grobler around (and I'm convinced that there are many), who are able to envisage a shopping space integrated with other kinds of spaces, softening the harsh impact of reductive consumer

space, and in the process recuperating urban space for the human beings who live there, there seems to be hope for life beyond rampant, mindless, un-dead consumer capitalism.

It should be admitted, as Gerald Steyn (2008: 1) has helpfully – but in critical vein – pointed out to me, that '…a new generation of shopping centres has [already] emerged, exemplified by (for example) the Irene Village Mall'. Although I am not familiar with the Mall, Steyn's description of it suggests that it is similar to the shopping centre design by Erik Grobler discussed earlier, which eschews the enclosed character of 'standard' shopping malls, 'opening up to the sky' instead. Steyn also mentions the centre of Hatfield in Pretoria as resembling 'such a permeable mall with its scattered facilities', and '…edges [which are] frayed out into the surrounding residential fabric, exactly as Erik Grobler proposes'. He continues by observing that 'these edges are, regrettably, a very dangerous area, as many students mugged at gunpoint can attest'. This leads Steyn to suggest that, sadly, a project such as Grobler's (or similar, existing centres) cannot work, as it presupposes a crime-free society (such as the community of Burlington, Vermont, USA, that he refers to). For Steyn, my critique of shopping malls as a manifestation of consumer capitalism is further 'a waste of time' or 'a futile exercise' (2008: 1, 2), given the pervasive signs of people desiring consumer products such as watches and cellphones, and of them being content to buy these as part of their 'post-industrial' existence. He also questions the need for resorting to the thinking of Marx, Marcuse and others that I have drawn on here, given the familiarity of 'alienating spaces'.

First, in light of Steyn's well-articulated criticism (for which I am grateful, because it has pointed to the need for clarification of certain issues), I must stress that I tried to be very clear about the object of my critique being the 'standard' shopping mall as described earlier in terms of its alienating spatial qualities, and not the new generation of shopping centres (as represented by Erik Grobler's design). That much should be clear. I am indebted to him for pointing out that (as I suspected), there are already such shopping centres in this country and elsewhere. In fact, since writing this paper, a new 'open plan' shopping centre (named, if I recall correctly, 'Moffet on Main'), similar to what Steyn describes, has opened up in Walmer, Port Elizabeth. It appears to be a hybrid, however, combining the 'open plan' avoidance of the enclosed 'standard' shopping mall with typically South African security-conscious perimeter design, which allows a high degree of access control. The very fact that an alternative concept seems to be operating here in various modes, namely, 'shopping centre' (instead of 'shopping mall'), as well as the fact that, in Steyn's words (2008: 2), 'a whole new paradigm is emerging in any case', seems to me to *confirm* that something is indeed very wrong with the soulless type of shopping mall that I have analysed in this paper. I believe one could legitimately understand the emergence of a new generation of shopping centres as a creative response to the alienation characteristic of the standard mall. And this validates my own analysis, rather than the other way around.

Regarding the (understandable) argument, put forward by Steyn, that an 'open' shopping centre is not viable in a crime-ridden society such as ours, I am ambivalent. On the one hand anyone can understand (and approve of) South African architectural designs – of shopping malls and 'security complexes' that seem like a contemporary resurfacing of the concept of medieval castles with access-controlling moat and portcullis – which take cognisance of the fact that we live in a crime-saturated society, but on the other I believe that, to withdraw behind our electrified fences and into access-controlled, enclosed mall spaces, is to play right into the hands of the criminals and of the increasing criminalization of South African urban space (see in this regard Olivier 2004). The only way one can reclaim this urban social space for civilized, peaceful living is precisely by redesigning or re-articulating it in ways that would erode the criminalizing appropriation of such space, which reinforces the division between a 'safe' inside and a 'dangerous' outside. This takes courage and determination, however, but could in the long

run, I believe, modify people's experience of space, as well as, correlatively, their behaviour. To this end, people in South Africa should find ways of taking social life back into the streets.

I confess that I am somewhat taken aback by Steyn's contention, that it is futile to criticize consumer capitalism; after all, from previous historical experience of (then) existing socio-economic conditions it should be clear that, just because it constitutes the *status quo*, does not make it justifiable. On the contrary, especially in the light of growing evidence, as I tried to show through the analysis of Snyder's film, above, that capitalism is in the process of 'consuming' our humanity – let alone life-sustaining 'nature' on this planet (see Gore 2007; Olivier 2005 & 2007a; Bakan 2004; Kovel 2007; Klein 2007) – it is of the greatest urgency that it be unmasked for what it is: the enemy of the very humanness in people, as well as the ecological integrity of nature. To be aware of this (to my astonishment, most people have still not registered that it is the case), and *not* to (try to) do something about it, is nothing short of unethical, in my view. The point is that capitalism is not, as its proponents would have one believe, an *innocuous* economic system, as many recent studies (like those referred to above) clearly indicate. Don't get me wrong: no one in their right mind could realistically advocate a wholesale abandonment of capitalism at present; it is the economic system in which we live at present. However, a transformation of capitalist practices, with a healthy public regulation of its excessive, unbridled, socially and ecosystemically damaging 'growth', *is* possible and urgently desirable, as the authors referred to above indicate by means of incontrovertible evidence.

Finally, it may be true, as Steyn suggests, that 'we all know…the qualities of alienating spaces' (2008: 1), but I would prefer to put 'know' in scare quotes here, because I don't believe – as he evidently does – that it is for that reason redundant to draw on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Marx, Marcuse and Silverman in characterizing and conceptually refining or nuancing the features of such alienating spaces. There are many people, including myself, who (could) benefit from the kind of insightful analysis of such spaces encountered in the work of these thinkers. One often knows something intuitively – evident, for instance, in the phenomenon of what Heidegger (1978: 172-179) called 'Befindlichkeit' ('state-of-mind', 'moodness' or 'attunement') – without knowing the reasons for this, and it is precisely those reasons which are articulated by the scholars concerned. Besides, I believe that Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 5) are profoundly correct when they discern the distinctiveness of philosophy as consisting in its 'creation of new concepts' – concepts (like Lacan's concept of the 'signifying chain' and of the 'real', or Derrida's of '*différance*')[6] which, when introduced into language, reconfigure the symbolic-conceptual fabric of the human world in far-reaching ways, enabling one to come to an understanding of phenomena that were previously, before this creative conceptual transformation of one's symbolic horizon, opaque and resistant to comprehension. If this were not the case, one would have a hard time justifying novel philosophical, or, for that matter, scientific and artistic reconfigurations of the world in which humans live. What I have attempted here, is precisely such a conceptual reconfiguration of the way people 'normally', but blindly, understand consumer capitalism, in the hope that I may, in this way, contribute to the disenchantment of an economic system which is largely responsible for the increasing destruction of the planetary ecosystems that are a prerequisite for all life on earth.[7]

Notes

1. See in connection with such a dehumanizing space (namely, that of apartheid) Olivier (1999).

2. In this respect I found in Silverman's (2000: 8-11) reading of Plato – especially of *The Symposium* – a surprising degree of support for my own attempt to show how he undermines his own remarkable quasi-phenomenology of love by way of an unwarranted, but psychoanalytically explicable, recourse to an

impossible realm of timelessness which may be understood in terms of what Lacan calls the 'maternal imago'. See Olivier 2006.

3. Regarding the important issue of the link between identity and desire, see Olivier 2006a and 2007, for an exploration, in psychoanalytic-theoretical terms, of the psychic mechanisms involved in such a process of identification, and possible ways to subvert the construction of a specifically consumer-capitalist identity.

4. I owe my familiarity with the film to one of my 4th-year Philosophy of Culture students, Lyndon Brand, who wrote an essay on it, interpreting the zombies, persuasively, to my mind, as the (metonymic) embodiment of consumerism. They are, literally, consumers.

5. Although this is a theme too complex to discuss exhaustively here, I have addressed it at length elsewhere in relation to some of the poststructuralists' work, namely that of Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard. See Olivier 2003 and 2003a.

6. See in this regard Olivier 2005a and 2005b, for a thematic elaboration on the far-reaching impact of concepts such as these in the work of the thinkers concerned.

7. As indicated earlier, I believe that it is of the utmost importance to create and promote an awareness of the impact of capitalist practices on people's behaviour and especially on the planet which is our, and all other earthly living creatures' home. To this end, I have recently resorted to writing in what is known as the 'blogosphere', in addition to writing in academic journals. See for example Olivier 2008.

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