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SHOPPING AND CONSUMPTION

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Introduction: exploring the *féerie* and phantasmagoria of the arcade

Cultural critic and theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was fascinated with the “shopping malls” of his time. Captivated by the sharp contrasts of light and shadow in the glass-roofed Parisian “arcades,” he saw these as enchanted replicas of the “world in miniature” (Benjamin 1999: 31). For more than a decade, Benjamin kept a series of folders (or “Convolutés”) containing scraps of notes with quotations, ideas, citations, images, and observations that became known as *The Arcades Project*. Legend has it that when Benjamin committed suicide in exile in 1940, a briefcase belonging to him went missing: it contained a completed manuscript drawn from the voluminous material related to the project (Taussig 2006: 9). Benjamin’s notes on the arcades are filled with the use of religious idiom. He refers to the arcades as “temples of commodity capital” and characterizes the structure of the arcade as “a nave with side chapels” (1999: 37). He calls the arcades “dream houses” or “dream cities”—glass-and-iron-trimmed rows of stores, enclosed and lit from above, filled with luxury goods and utopian promise. Piecing together Benjamin’s fragments, Margaret Cohen marks a transition from the earlier period of the project, when Benjamin cast the arcades as a kind of *féerie* or enchanted world of supernatural creatures and magical objects (Cohen 2004: 203). A theatrical genre popular in France, the *féerie* used special effects and dreamy aesthetics to draw audiences into a mystical world of fantasy creatures and otherworldly events. In the latter years of Benjamin’s project, his theatrical cognate for the arcades had become much darker and shifted from the image of the *féerie* to the phantasmagoria (ibid.: 207). Like the *féerie*, the phantasmagoria used special effects and the projection of light and shadow to create illusion, but instead of faeries, the phantasmagoria woke the dead, conjuring demons and ghosts. With the use of lanterns, candles, smoke, and mirrors, the phantasmagoria projected frightening images of a shadow world haunted by terrifying specters. For Walter Benjamin, the arcade housed both these cultural expressions of the mystifications of capitalism.

A critical look at religion, consumption, and shopping culture in the USA illustrates the complex interplay of religious symbolism and capitalism of which Benjamin

was so keenly aware. The prolific use of religious idiom to talk about things like "shopping" evokes both the *féerie* and the phantasmagoria of Benjamin's analysis. From the Mall of America to the Apple Store, and from Oprah to child-star "Honey Boo Boo Child," the projections of both the *féerie* and the dark phantasmagoria are alive and well, together producing dreamlike cultural expressions of hope and horror. To explore these, Benjamin's arcade itself provides an ideal structure. In the sections below, think if you will of moving through a series of compartmentalized and yet connected retail spaces, punctuated by mirrors, enclosed by glass, and linked by walkways. Each one is filled with tempting offerings and expertly framed by "authentic" faux foliage illuminated by carefully staged lighting. What do we ultimately come away with from our sojourn into the arcade?

Temples of consumerism

Are shopping malls sacred spaces? Is shopping a religion? Whatever the answer may be to each of these questions, the fact that so many commentators on culture (both academic and non-academic) speak of consumption and shopping in terms of religious language should make us sit up and take notice. What does it mean to call arcades or, in this case, contemporary shopping malls "temples"? How things get categorized and classified matters. That religious idiom is repeatedly used to express the nature of institutions, environments, and experiences related to shopping signals that these things are being given a certain weight or seriousness. It communicates a degree of intensity or commitment to shopping, a heightened degree of what Ann Taves would term as "specialness" to shopping, a degree of ritual import to shopping, and it even connotes a supernatural aspect to shopping (Chidester 2005: vii) which contests its otherwise commonplace secular categorization.

In the 1980s, Ira Zepp, Jr. produced the first phenomenological religious studies analysis of enclosed shopping malls in the USA. In *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center* (1997), Zepp looked at shopping mall architecture and floor plans much in the way that Mircea Eliade had analyzed sacred cities of the world in his books on comparative religion (Zepp 1997: 51–53). Zepp theorized that planners filled the central mall atrium with beautiful displays of water and idyllic vegetation to recreate an Edenic world of perfect blissful reflection. The mall center, comments Zepp in Eliadean fashion, "with all the paths leading to the middle, is a replication of the primordial world in all its harmony and pristine order" (ibid.: 51). Frequently, points out Zepp, this "miniature world" features some sort of world tree or world center. A more recent example of such a feature, since the publication of Zepp's book, would be the two-story-high oak tree at the center of Northbrook Court Mall in Northbrook, Illinois. When the deteriorating mall was remodeled in the 1990s to "revitalize" it, a gigantic tree was added in the atrium, complete with a tree house for children to climb into. Although the Northbrook mall features installations of idyllic gardens and fountains, the colossal faux "world tree" provides the distinct center of mall community and activity. Eliade termed this kind of symbolic sacred center an "omphalos" or "world navel" and associated it with the presence of an "axis mundi" or "world axis," which he theorized provided a point of sacred connection between the human world and the world of the gods

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(Eliade 1987: 36–47). Whether strategically and centrally placing Edenic fountains, cosmic mountains, or world trees, Zepp argues that mall designers “do as the gods did in the beginning,” engaged in an *imitatio Dei* by crafting an idyllic environment designed to elicit feelings of sacredness and perfection (Zepp 1997: 33–35). Malls had become the new “temples of worship.” What’s more, for Zepp, they possess a distinct advantage over more traditional religious spaces: “The shopping mall, open almost every day from 10 A.M. to 9 P.M. ... is a more inclusive and egalitarian center [than] most churches” (ibid.: 80).

Looking at descriptions and photographic images of turn-of-the-century department stores in the USA, religious historian Leigh Schmidt analyzes very explicit church features and aesthetics found in grand department stores, such as Philadelphia’s famous Wanamaker’s (Schmidt 1995: 159). Using historical examples of popular material culture, Schmidt shows how, during the holiday season especially, these stores became magical wonderlands, “enchantments of consumer culture” and “Christmas cathedrals” that fostered the convergence of shopping with Protestant church aesthetics. The 1911 installation of an ornate organ in the splendid marble-trimmed atrium of Wanamaker’s completed the picture of a store that was a church and its customers the faithful. Wanamaker’s was eventually subsumed under other department store names, and the latter part of the twentieth century marked the decline of stand-alone department stores, but stores such as Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s took on new roles as “anchor” stores on either side of large-scale enclosed malls. Inside these climate-controlled retail terraria, anchor department stores (for a period of time) regained some of their mystical aura.

In *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption* (2010), sociologist George Ritzer points to the mechanisms by which shopping malls serve to “re-enchant” a “disenchanted” world:

Shopping malls have been described as places where people go to practice their “consumer religion.” It has been contended that shopping malls are more than commercial and financial enterprises; they have much in common with the religious center of traditional civilizations. Like such religious centers, malls are seen as fulfilling people’s need to connect with each other and with nature (trees, plants, flowers), as well as their need to participate in festivals. Malls provide the kind of centeredness traditionally provided by religious temples, and they are constructed to have similar balance, symmetry, and order. The atriums usually offer connection to nature through water and vegetation. People gain a sense of community as well as more specific community services. Play is almost universally part of religious practice, and malls provide a place (the food court) for people to frolic. Similarly, malls offer a setting in which people can partake in ceremonial meals. Malls clearly qualify for the label of cathedrals of consumption.

(Ritzer 2010: 10)

As a scholar of design, Lisa Scharoun, much like Benjamin, looks at the construction of malls as “dream spaces”—as mirrors of utopian longings rife with salvific imagery and supernatural intimations. Unlike Zepp, who sees malls as largely supplanting in function more traditional religious spaces, Scharoun points to more of a convergence.

In *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of a Retail Utopia* (2012), she draws less distinction than do other analysts between malls as enchanted secular spaces and more traditional religious spaces, chronicling a variety of religious communities that have now infiltrated mall space (52). Zepp had featured the Mall Area Religious Council (MARC), a conglomeration of 25 religious groups in the area of the Mall of America that works to create connections between religious groups and mall spaces, and Scharoun further points to the blurring of these boundaries. With the growing popularity of religious storefronts in malls, rather than competing against malls as “cathedrals of consumption” that siphon off the faithful, savvy religious groups have instead integrated their storefronts and chapels into these spaces, occupying retail space where they, like their retail neighbors, capitalize on “foot traffic” and “window shopping.” To use R. Laurence Moore’s (1994) phrase, when “selling God,” as with any other retail enterprise, the three most important things are: “location, location, and location.”

All that glitters is not gold for Lutheran theologian Jon Pahl, whose *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Places* (2009) sees more sinister ghosts than magical faeries lurking in the mall. Both Ritzer and Scharoun point to malls, despite their dreamy aesthetics, as providing real and important community functions. In contrast, Pahl contends that shopping malls such as the Mall of America, in all their fantastic attributes, simulate the Kingdom of God, infusing the mall with a palpable feeling of grace that is powerful yet ultimately false. The mall promises its pilgrims pure happiness and fulfillment through consumption—shopping as a path to salvation—intoxicating the consumer with the euphoric prospect of a better life free of pain and discomfort. Yet, at some point, Pahl claims, these promises do not deliver and leave consumers feeling depressed and haunted by their own empty hearts. Highly critical of the mall’s glittering artifice that promises salvation but delivers none, Pahl anxiously urges a reorientation instead toward “real” spaces in nature that offer authentic and sustainable spiritual nourishment.

Pahl’s mistrust of the mall’s apparent enchantments echoes the earlier pop-culture critique made by independent filmmaker George Romero, who intertwines the sublime and the horrific in his apocalyptic cult classic, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The film’s protagonists seek refuge from a zombie outbreak in the local shopping mall, which subsequently becomes both sanctuary and prison as the zombies relentlessly try to fight their way in. Matthew Walker examines Romero’s depiction of zombies as the ultimate consumers, and observes how zombies are indeed all around us, and the specter of a “zombie outbreak” hardly fictional: “Doubt it? Go and you’ll see them shuffling down the aisles, staring vacantly into space, consuming without end. At Christmastime, you’ll find them pressed against store windows, hell-bent on hot bargains” (2010: 81). Julie Corman’s science fiction horror film, *Chopping Mall* (1986), drives home similar themes, casting shopping malls as places of cleverly masked horror and unseen violence. In the opening sequence, Corman’s mall initially appears as a kind of idyllic 1980s American sanctuary, complete with modern glass ceilings, pristine potted trees and plants, beauty queens, and even the most technologically advanced “security mall robots.” When the robots go out of control and become “killbots,” the veneer of “security” peels away, revealing the real horrors and carnage of consumption, both of which are predicted in the film’s bloody tagline: “Where Shopping Costs You an Arm and a Leg.”

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Malls littered with butchered corpses, as in Corman's film, or infested with the "Undead," as in Romero's, presage the current fascination with the study of so-called "dead malls." A subject of fascination for retail historians, artists, videographers, and even ghost hunters, "dead malls" are eerie ghost towns of abandoned retail space. Trespassing "explorers" with cameras who wish to investigate the mall's dark and empty corners, collecting data to document its history and death, have become numerous enough to pose a significant security problem at "dead and dying malls" around the country. Investigators can log their data-collecting experiences and videos at Deadmalls.com, a virtual phantasmagoria of ghosts and shadows. In a somewhat ironic twist to cultural commentators who have fretted about the seductive enchantments of the mall supplanting American churches, as it turns out, a number of these "dead malls" are being purchased and assimilated by religious organizations. After the Forest Park Mall in Illinois "died" in the 1990s, Living Word Christian Ministries bought and took over the 33-acre mall in 1998 (Working 2007). The defunct Forest Park Mall has since been resurrected as Forest Park Plaza and houses the Living Word Worship Center, the Living Word Bible Training Center, and the Living Word Mission Center, among Christian retail shops, a Christian bookstore, and a Christian café. The once-deserted auditorium is now filled with high-definition Jumbotrons for worship services, and the once-still corridors now boom with the sounds of Christian rock bands performing live at the mall's center. Forest Park Plaza's updated slogan reads: "A place where the integrity of God creates a lasting foundation for success and changes the economic destiny of the people." Here, once again, we see promises of salvation and altered destinies—visions of economically successful futures and transformed lives made possible by a worship and practice in which God has taken over the mall, and presumably has been a better business marketer and manager than the previous owner. Instead of analyzing malls as "temples" or "cathedrals of consumption" that threaten to displace traditional religious institutions, a new wave of scholarship might instead examine malls themselves as "consumed" spaces, devoured and assimilated by religious institutions.

MRI and Black Fridays

Beyond the discourse on shopping malls as the new "temples" or "cathedrals," religious idiom also pervades critiques of shopping fervor. A series of shopping-crush deaths in 2005 prompted business writer Julian Baggini of the *Guardian* to publish a widely circulated article asking whether shopping might not be "the new religion and Mammon our new God" (Baggini 2005). Baggini asserted, "The kind of 'must have' mania that infects some shoppers as they close in on a good deal is more akin to the imperatives of religious devotion than those of personal finance." For Baggini, this kind of shopping hysteria is a disease that "infects" shoppers, presumably much like the transmission mechanism for religious fanaticism. Crazy shopping is thus cast as both new "religion" and a dangerous pathogen. Baggini is certainly not the first to equate religion with "disease." In the sixth century Heraclitus of Ephesus, according to a number of sources, is supposed to have called religion "a disease," albeit a

noble one.¹ Sigmund Freud, most notably in *The Future of an Illusion* (1989: 54–56), pathologized religion in light of psychoanalytic theory and the notion of neurosis. More recently, Darrel Ray (2009) has written about “the God virus” and the ways in which “religion infects our lives and culture.” So, in Baggini’s commentary, religious devotion makes a good analogy for shopping “mania” because it, like infectious disease, is communicable, invades its host, causes nasty systemic problems or disorders, and can be “tough to get rid of.”

In the 2011 documentary *Secrets of the Superbrands*, BBC filmmakers Adam Boome and Alex Riley made the link between the disease of religion and the disease of shopping even more explicit by subjecting both “maladies” to high-tech medical diagnostic testing. Riley keenly observed an example of shopping “mania” when filming the opening of a new Apple store in London’s Covent Garden. Riley writes, “The scenes I witnessed at the opening of the new Apple store in London’s Covent Garden were more like an evangelical prayer meeting than a chance to buy a phone or a laptop.” Riley and his producers followed up their filming by asking one ecstatic Apple devotee, who had made pilgrimage to 30 different Apple store openings around the world, to submit to an MRI diagnostic brain scan. In the film, a team of neuroscientists places the Apple fan inside the MRI scanner and shows him images of Apple’s logo and products. They then record his physiological responses and report that “the results [suggest] Apple was actually stimulating the same parts of the brain as religious imagery does in people of faith” (Riley and Boome 2011). This is an “ah-hah” or “gotcha” moment in the film, the link being scientifically drawn using medical equipment designed specifically to diagnose *disease*.

In an article titled “America’s real religion: shopping,” history professor Lawrence Wittner echoes these asserted links between religious devotion and shopping fanaticism (Wittner 2012). Commenting on the mob violence associated with “Black Friday” (the day-after-Thanksgiving’s official start of the Christmas shopping season), Wittner observed: “The frenzied participants were not starving, impoverished peasants or product-deprived refugees from Communist nations but reasonably comfortable, middle-class Americans. Their desperation was not driven by hunger. They simply wanted ... more!” Wittner blames churches for “not opposing the corporate cultivation of untrammelled greed among Americans.” In so doing, he argues that “churches have left the door open to the triumph of America’s new religion—not liberal secularism, but shopping” (ibid.).

Across a variety of platforms, expressions of popular culture diagnose shopping “mania” as the equivalent of religious fanaticism. What does this tell us? Is this a way to communicate irrationality, intense emotion, unhealthy obsession, extremism, and ultimately something dangerous and out of control? What’s more, cultural observers evoke the specter of “real” or “authentic” religion being subsumed or taken over by a virulent consumerism run amok. Even Sharon Zurkin (2005), in her sociological history of how shopping has changed American culture, sounds the death knell for religion: “We shop because we long for value—for a virtuous ideal of value that we no longer get from religion, work, or politics” (8). No longer relevant, religion is replaced by shopping, the “new religion,” as Wittner calls it. Russell McCutcheon points out that “‘religion’ is a wonderfully useful rhetorical tool that packs a significant rhetorical punch” (McCutcheon 2004: 179). Classification matters.

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The fact that shopping is classified by a variety of public cultural commentators in a variety of media contexts as being “a religion” signals something very important about perceptions of shopping, the societal role it plays, anxieties about the place of religion and its power in society, as well as fears about religion’s potential demise.

Shopalujah!

Two weeks after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, as the USA headed into war, then-President George W. Bush urged families to head on “down to Disney World” and to keep spending money. In a later speech, Bush lamented that some Americans “don’t want to go shopping for their families” and feel intimidated to do so. A number of political pundits interpreted the administration’s message as one that promised America salvation through consumption. If Americans stopped shopping, then the terrorists had “won.” Sociologist Andrew Weigert has written about this kind of mentality as the American “ethic of consumption” that expresses itself best through Evangelical popular culture. Ironically, says Weigert, it is not “this-worldly asceticism ... but this-worldly consumerism” that is a sign of salvation. It is the American Protestant televangelist who most skillfully hammers home this message: “consuming, or helping their televangelist to consume, signals salvation, and thus provides that supreme motive that all believers seek” (Weigert 1991: 111). This “most American of messages, salvation through consumption,” says Weigert, goes beyond the televangelist and audience and permeates American culture. In so doing, it effectively “takes [sociologist Max] Weber’s thesis and stands it on its head” (ibid.). Although President Bush did not use the exact words, as some have claimed, “Go out and shop!”, his phrasing at a time of extreme crisis about a way to salvation through Disney vacations and family shopping trips evoked, especially for those who share Bush’s Evangelical faith, a resonant call to this “ethic of consumerism.” The most powerful and efficient route to vanquishing the dark ghosts lingering amid the mangled iron and shattered glass of the World Trade Center would be a trip to the *féerie* and utopian enchantments of Disney World, “the happiest place on earth.”

If anyone “gets” the tensions between the ethereal aura of corporate retail “dream worlds” and their darker masked specters, it is New York performance artist and street theater activist Bill Tallen. Taking on the messianic street-corner evangelist personality of “Reverend Billy,” he inserts himself into the smoke and mirrors that veil the layers between the *féerie* and the phantasmagoria. In Reverend Billy, there is much of what David Chidester (and Lowenthal 1992, Trilling 1972, and Baudrillard 1983 before him) analyzes as “authentic fakes,” the play and improvisation of religious forms in popular culture that nonetheless do “real religious work” (Chidester 2005: 2–3). Reverend Billy and his “Church of Life After Shopping” (formerly the “Church of Stop Shopping”) stage public shopping “interventions” at corporate retailers like the Disney Store, Starbucks, and Wal-Mart (Lane 2002: 70). In these acts of what his group calls “ritual resistance,” they exorcise cash registers, illuminate the environmental impact and labor practices used in manufacturing various products, and “snap people out of the hypnosis” or the magical enchantment they

feel while shopping (Reverend Billy: The Church of Stop Shopping n.d.). Although they identify themselves as a “post religious church,” Reverend Billy and his “Earthalujah Choir” persistently pose the moral question to consumers, “What would Jesus buy?” In the 2007 documentary film of the same name, produced by Morgan Spurlock, Reverend Billy prophesies the “shopocalypse,” a prophecy that the Reverend says has now come to fruition. That is, we are literally “shopping ourselves to death,” as rampant capitalism and obsessive consumerism have intensified climate-change-related natural disasters such as the 2012 hurricane “Sandy.” Marking the Mayan calendar doomsday, Reverend Billy and the Life After Shopping Church held an “End of the World” ritual in Times Square, seeking to “turn back the devils of debt and destruction, rallying those of radical faith to save themselves and save us all.” Reverend Billy also offers exorcism services to cast the shopping demons out of “shopaholics,” who like many Americans “walk in the valley of the shadow of debt.” He has also performed exorcisms directly on credit cards and investment bankers and has attempted to cast the “evil spirits” and “dark soul” out of British Petroleum following the oil disaster caused by its leaking oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. In 2008, Billy’s church held a candlelit prayer vigil in the parking lot of the Long Island Wal-Mart, where employee Jdimytai Damour was trampled to death on Black Friday by “out-of-control” shoppers who broke down the store doors at five in the morning and stepped over Damour’s dead body in order to make their way to discounted plasma television sets. As Wal-Mart employees informed shoppers over the PA system that an employee had been killed and they would have to leave, shoppers yelled back that they had been in line since Friday morning, they would not leave, and they kept on shopping (Mallia and Chayes 2008). The death of Damour by shopper stampede came just two months after one of the worst death tolls ever recorded from religious stampede, as 224 pilgrims were trampled to death when 25,000 worshipers rushed the doors of the Chamunda Devi Temple in northern India during the 2008 Kumbh Mela festival (*Hindustan Times* 2013).

Bethany Moreton, author of *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2009), may not be surprised by the juxtaposition of these two stampedes and the comparison between “religious temples” and “retail temples.” In her history of Wal-Mart, Moreton tells the story of how Evangelical values and frameworks came to be embedded in Wal-Mart’s corporate structure and management strategies. Notions of “Christian service” and male-led family “headship,” concepts that employees practice in their own homes and churches, came to define Wal-Mart’s workforce. Moreton observes: “Drawing on the new relationships among managers, employees, and customers in its stores and on the regional evangelical revival, the company’s emerging service ethos honored [employees] as Christian servants” (Moreton 2009: 89). Wal-Mart stores became inscribed or encoded with a language, imagery, and personnel dynamic that “read” like both “Christian home” and “church” to its Evangelical patrons. Unlike the luxurious ornamentation of Philadelphia department stores, such as Wanamaker’s, that simulated the aesthetics of elite Protestant churches, Wal-Mart’s stripped-down frugal “warehouse” aesthetic felt more like the modest contemporary rural and/or storefront churches its Evangelical customers associated with worship. Operation Rescue founder and Christian

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Coalition director Ralph Reed once famously advised political strategists: "If you want to reach the Christian population on Sunday, you do it from the church pulpit. If you want to reach them on Saturday, you do it in Wal-Mart" (ibid.: 90). In this way, says Moreton, Wal-Mart came to sanctify "Christian free enterprise," "servant leadership," folksy frugality, while (in a twist on Adam Smith) exalting the gospel of God's invisible hand in the sanctity of neoliberal globalization.

As with "dead" malls, however, Wal-Marts that have expanded too quickly, in a shrinking economy, themselves are becoming consumed and transformed into sites of conversion. In 2012, the Cornerstone Church took over the Wal-Mart in Marion, IL, and turned it into an unconventional 120,000 square-foot worship space (Fox News.com 2012). In the same year, Evangelical megachurch purchases of Wal-Mart retail stores for conversion into worship space ranged from Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, and Nebraska to Florida and Louisiana (see Ford-Stewart 2013; Lostroh 2012; OnlineAthens 2011; Hovey 2011; Moore 2011). When giving a media tour of Church of Eleven22's newly converted Wal-Mart home in Jacksonville, Florida, Senior Pastor Joby Martin pointed out to camera crews that the congregation's new children's safari-themed "worship center" sits right on the spot where he used to purchase his shotgun shells at Wal-Mart. "Little did Sam Walton know that when he was putting a Wal-Mart here, he was actually part of building the Kingdom of God," expounded the pastor (see FirstCoastNews.com n.d.). Bethany Moreton's research for her book on Wal-Mart and the Walton family suggests otherwise—that Sam Walton might be anything but surprised by connections between his commercial endeavors and efforts to hasten the Kingdom of God's arrival.

In the Church of Life After Shopping's tours across America's heartland, Reverend Billy has performed numerous "exorcisms" in Wal-Mart parking lots as well as inside the retail space, charismatically casting demons out of the register with his most exuberant preacherly flair. Reverend Billy is not the only one, however, doing battle with the "demons of shopping." Estimates of Americans with diagnosed "compulsive buying disorder" cite around 18 million afflicted (Workman and Paper 2010: 89). Founded in 1968, Debtors Anonymous (DA) holds more than 500 weekly meetings in 15 countries and identifies itself as a "fellowship" for compulsive spenders (DebtorsAnonymous.org 2011). Following the structure and process of 12-Step programs and modeled with some modification on Alcoholics Anonymous, DA testimonials frequently recount how fellowship members came to terms with their "disease." One anonymous member recalls: "I gradually came to realize my debting disease manifests every time I assume that I am so special I can have whatever I want, whenever I want it, without having to earn it or pay for it" (Anonymous n.d.). Although DA is not a religious organization per se, as with AA, belief in a "higher power" is key, and those in recovery frequently characterize their struggle to deal with their disease in spiritual terms. In Debtors Anonymous, the strands of disease, shopping, and religion once more intertwine, an entanglement that has been reinforced through recent popular cultural expressions. Sophie Kinsella's bestselling "Shopaholic" novel series—made into the 2009 film *Confessions of a Shopaholic*—brought the "disease" of compulsive spending and debting into more widespread popular consciousness, employing both comedic and serious portrayals of real addiction. Shopaholic "Rebecca's" retail conquests are ecstatic experiences that she

has longed for since childhood, when she would gaze into the “dreamy world of perfect things” inside shop windows. There, we are told, she would see “grown-up girls, like faeries or princesses, getting anything they wanted” because they had “magic cards” (Hogan 2009). Rebecca’s entrancement with the retail “faery world” is finally broken by the stark consequences of credit card debt and the prospect of homelessness in New York City. Like the 12-steppers in DA, Rebecca goes on a “spiritual journey” where she must confront the demons that lurk underneath pretty silk scarves and sparkling Jimmy Choo shoes. Rebecca does not quite exclaim “Revolujah!” in Reverend Billy fashion, but she does see the error of her ways and struggles to vanquish her “shopping demons.”

Rebecca’s road to recovery from “shopaholism” and academic analyses of shopping malls, like the Apple Store fanatic MRI, Reverend Billy’s street theater activism and, of course, Benjamin’s reading of the Parisian arcades all still focus on “brick and mortar” retail spaces. How fascinated Benjamin might have been by today’s virtual arcades on eBay, Amazon.com, or Zappos.com. What might he have made of “Cyber Monday,” the “point and click” shopping component to the ceremonial holiday retail triptych: Black Friday, “Shop Local Saturday,” and now, “Cyber Monday”? And what of the new ritualistic culture of online shopping and “shop and tell” social media, in which the posting of so-called “haul videos” post-consumption has become a form of evangelizing or witnessing to other potential shoppers? As of 2012, YouTube hosted more than a quarter of a million “haul videos,” in which shoppers display their shopping hauls, including product details and prices. The videos receive tens of millions of hits and create their own “haul” celebrities with their own passionate “vlogger” (video blogger) followings.

HBO’s drama series *Big Love* (2006–11) offers audiences a reading of contemporary online and cable shopping “addiction” that specifically draws parallels between religious “fanaticism” and fanatical consumption. The story of *Big Love* centers on a family of independent fundamentalist polygamous Mormons. The family’s patriarch, “Bill Henrickson,” had once lived as a young boy on a fictitious polygamous compound (“Juniper Creek”) similar to those associated with the real-life Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). Bill’s second wife, “Nicki,” who has lived most of her life on the compound with few modern conveniences and in a milieu of relative material deprivation, is the daughter of the religion’s central prophet. In Season One of the series, Nicki develops a serious online and cable “home shopping addiction.” The narrative portrayal of Nicki’s addiction juxtaposes her indoctrination as a child into extreme religious practice and her now-adult compulsive shopping behavior. As Nicki’s new marital situation transports her off the fundamentalist compound and into “mainstream” suburban life, the narrative suggests that one form of religious fervor replaces another, exchanging or transferring “addictions.” When Nicki’s sister wives discover that she has incurred over \$60,000 of credit card debt, thus compromising the financial security of the entire family, they realize she is “unwell,” much in the way outsiders cast the “cult-like” activity on the fundamentalist compound as a “disease.”

First sister wife “Barb’s” own mother and sister, who are members of the more mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), treat her as though she has fallen under an evil spell or has been brainwashed to maintain her continued

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loyalty to Bill and their polygamous life. Like Nicki and her shopping addiction, Barb is “unwell.” Later in the series, Bill’s third wife, “Margene,” develops a devoted following as a popular home shopping network retail personality, and then finds herself sucked into a retail pyramid marketing scheme, having fallen under the spell of a charismatic guru-like leader who hawks energy drinks. At various points in the series, the writers prompt the viewing audience to question what gets “read” or classified as “addiction,” “illness,” “religion” and/or “cult” and why. The sister wives are not the only ones who struggle with compulsive behavior. Bill himself is simultaneously consumed by the capitalist drive to build his financial empire at all costs, while obsessed with consolidating his authority as a religious entrepreneur and new church founder. As Bill deals with the moral dilemmas and questions raised in both of these realms, he is increasingly haunted by visions of Joseph Smith’s ghost and that of his wife, Emma. In the end, it is Bill who becomes a ghost as he occupies his old chair at the family table and watches as his wives take up and run both the family’s financial and now religious empire.

Retail gods

In *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture* (2011), Peter Ward observes that at its root, popular culture “draw[s] us into a conversation about what we do and do not value” (2). Analyzing the phenomenon of “celebrity worship,” Ward contends that religious analogy is the closest one can come to adequately characterizing the kind of relationship fans have toward celebrities. He writes,

Celebrities are routinely called idols, or icons, and from time to time they are called “divine” or even referred to as “gods.” Fans are said to be devoted to celebrities, to adore them, and in many cases the behavior of fans is likened to “worship.”

(Ward 2011: 3)

For fans, many celebrities take on supernatural qualities and, as Gary Laderman says, “arouse the religious passions of followers in modern society who find spiritual meaning, personal fulfillment, and awe-inspiring motivation in the presence of these idols” (Laderman 2009: 64). In the tradition of *imitatio Dei*, fans do as the gods do, especially in the realm of retail. Because most fans cannot spend \$3,000 to \$5,000 on handbags or afford \$900 Manolo Blahnik shoes, fan magazines like *Us Weekly* and *In Touch* regularly run “Get That Look!” features, in which the magazine suggests more financially modest “knock offs” for fans to dress like the gods and thus capture some of their supernatural resplendence. Not just clothing accessories, but pricey bodily modifications become highly organized ritual attempts at celebrity imitation. For devotees who cannot afford the high cost of a plastic surgeon, cheaper alternatives become a path to “get that look.” In imitation of reality TV-star Kim Kardashian’s famous posterior silicone injections, “pumping parties” (wherein unlicensed “Madames” inject partygoers’ backsides with cheap industrial silicone, Super Glue, and Fix-A-Flat tire sealant) became all the rage among Hollywood wannabes until partygoers began bringing

home sepsis, fatal allergic reactions, and multi-organ and lung failure as “party favors” (Broach 2013; Nelson 2012).

Still, the pull to imitate the idol or “celebrity god” through imitative consumption is a powerful devotional call. In her chapter on “Practicing purchase” in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, Kathryn Lofton illuminates the “spiritual capitalism” of Oprah Winfrey and her peddling of a “good news materialism” through purchasing recommendations and directives issued to what Lofton calls her “congregants” (Lofton 2011a: 22). For Lofton, Oprah’s approach to her television audience, magazine readership, and online community is catechistic. Consuming the “right goods” becomes a pathway to personal growth, spiritual improvement, and a meaningful, purposeful life. Lofton explains that, “In Winfrey’s capitalist modernity, this materiality is *spiritual practice*” (ibid., emphasis in original), and what “separates Winfrey’s work is the soul-saving signification attached to her recommendations” (ibid.: 23). Oprah’s congregants

are told that their purchasing power is correlated to their moral merit. Individual shopping choices offer moments of possible piety: “Our simplest shopping decisions can protect the environment, save family farmers, lift villages from destitution, and restore dignity to war-torn communities.”

(ibid.: 35)

If Oprah’s mantra is “Behave your way to success” (ibid.: 24), “reality” TV’s sassy Honey Boo Boo’s mantra is “Misbehave your way to success.” One might reasonably assume that successful business woman and media empire mogul Oprah Winfrey and small-town pageant princess Honey Boo Boo would have little in common. And yet, Honey Boo Boo’s fans, like Oprah’s congregants, also demonstrate a devoted practice of purchase. Dubbed alternately the “Redneck Messiah” and the “White Trash Messiah,” Honey Boo Boo (whose real name is Alana Thompson) first rose to fame on The Learning Channel’s (TLC) controversial series *Toddlers and Tiaras* (2009–11). The program showcased little girls whose mothers go to extreme measures to transform their daughters into heavily made-up adult-looking contestants. The average cost to families for each pageant, including dresses, travel costs, hair, makeup, spray tans, padded bras, jewelry, coaches, and false teeth, is between \$3,000 and \$5,000. The program tallies this competitive consumption, often undertaken by contestant families of meager financial means, as it documents the ritual of pageant preparation and performance (Blue 2012).

Honey Boo Boo both charmed and captivated audiences (in a train wreck way) not only with her transmogrification from a wisecracking scruffy “redneck kid” to a painted child-woman princess, but also with her startling performance of stereotypical “strong Black woman” vernacular and gesture. Part Lolita, part Martin Lawrence in drag, Honey Boo Boo’s minstrel-esque monologues are a surrealistic study in “redneck Ebonics,” as she wags her finger at the camera with a scowl, bobs her head of blonde curls from side to side, and proclaims “no she di’n’t” (see Andrews 2012). So captivated were audiences that in 2012, TLC contracted with her and her family to do their own spin-off program called *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. In Season One of the new show, viewers watched seven-year-old Honey Boo Boo drink

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pageant “Go Go Juice” (a potent cocktail of Mountain Dew and Red Bull), down 15 bags of “pageant crack” (pixy sticks of sugar), and eat road kill served to her by “Mama June,” her overbearing pageant mother. Critics howled, raised questions of child abuse, and chastised TLC for exploiting Honey Boo Boo for financial gain. However, the online “Hillbilly Gossip” site, the *Hillbilly Times*, and many other media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, sang Honey Boo Boo’s praises for ministering to our times, “a Shirley Temple for this ceaseless Great Recession” (Oldenburg 2012).

What does it mean to call Honey Boo Boo the “Redneck Messiah,” and what sort of salvation is being offered? In her home state of Georgia, Honey Boo Boo began to be regarded as an economic savior of sorts, single-handedly boosting the fortunes of beleaguered small rural businesses as fans flocked to anywhere that Honey Boo Boo had shopped. As with Oprah, an endorsement from Honey Boo Boo became the Midas touch. After one episode aired that showed Honey Boo Boo shopping at a local boutique, Lucy Lu’s in Douglas, Georgia, the store was mobbed with local viewers. A tiny business struggling to keep afloat, Lucy Lu’s sold out its stock and moved more than three hundred Honey Boo Boo T-shirts in just a week (Proud 2012). Each time Honey Boo Boo was scheduled for a local publicity event, fans would travel hundreds of miles to make what press called “sacred pilgrimage,” thus boosting local economies in small depressed Georgia towns. “As far as we know,” reported one pundit, “Honey Boo Boo did not multiply the loaves of bread—but we’re guessing that local Wal-Marts reported record low numbers that day” (The Daily Scandal n.d.; emphasis in the original).

Like Oprah, Honey Boo Boo’s “favorite things” provide her fans with a way to practice their devotion to her through consumption. What’s more, the influence of both Oprah and Honey Boo Boo extends beyond the realm of entertainment and shopping to serving as a source of political authority. Indeed, in 2012, when Honey Boo Boo Child publicly endorsed Barack Obama on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (ABC, aired 15 October 2012), her endorsement received far more press coverage than did Oprah’s endorsement. Winfrey, who grew up a poor bare-foot girl on a “red dirt road in Mississippi” (Lofton 2011a: 24) struggled up and out of the poverty, racism, and sexual abuse of her childhood to become a self-made billionaire, a virtual Cinderella story of self-improvement, right thinking, hard work, and the powers of purchase. Roadkill-eating Honey Boo Boo, hailing from a poor, white, uneducated family in rural Georgia has also “made good.” Mama June gambled that grueling pageants, necessitating thousands of dollars in costumes and “Go Go Juice” for stamina, and the rebranding of daughter Alana into the commodity that has become “Honey Boo Boo,” would all pay off, magically turning her daughter (financially at least) into the enchanted princess she performs as for the pageant judges. Whether messiah or fairy princess, Honey Boo Boo’s episodes of prancing about in grown-up makeup and sexy outfits also conjured the dark specter of six-year-old beauty pageant queen JonBenét Ramsey, who was strangled to death in 1996. Honey Boo Boo had become the newest model for the kind of child sexploitation blamed for JonBenét’s widely publicized murder. Since her death, JonBenét, on a much smaller scale than Honey Boo Boo, has also been a “reality” TV money-maker, as shows like TruTV’s *Haunting Evidence* (2005–8) sent paranormal investigators and a medium to the Ramsey home to connect with JonBenét’s ghost (“Inside the Ramsey House” 2008),

while more recently various “ghost-hunting” cable programs have tried to make contact with her petite poltergeist.

For all of Honey Boo Boo’s moxie, unlike Oprah, she is *not* a powerful adult but still a vulnerable child at the mercy of her parents’ judgment (or lack thereof). In August 2012, after receiving a video of Honey Boo Boo being paid to “table dance” for frat boys at a college bar, Child Protective Services began to investigate the child star’s family. By the fall of 2012, a full-time body-guard had been posted to Honey Boo Boo in response to kidnapping threats and an attempted home invasion by a suspected pedophile. Around the same time, media blogs began to refer to the beauty queen *cum* “Redneck Messiah” as the latest “sacrificial lamb” to greed-driven “reality” TV profits, while the alternative rock band WAN released a concept album called *Honey Boo Boo: Human Sacrifice* (2012).² Mandy McMichael, a scholar of religion at Duke University who conducts ethnographic research on beauty pageants in Alabama, says: “When I tell people that I study religion and beauty pageants in America, they usually ask, ‘What do beauty pageants have to do with religion?’ ‘Everything,’ I reply” (McMichael 2010).

Conclusions: *consumo ergo sum*

In “Convolute N” of *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

(Benjamin 1999: 460)

Benjamin becomes a master at juxtaposing a series of dialectical images and quotations, assembling “large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components” (ibid.: 461). The experience of moving through the arched corridor of the arcade is itself an experience of montage, where shops with fancy ladies’ hats appear next to dusty “tabacs,” and spools of delicate lace next to racks of glistening knives.

In 2009, the creative agency Digital Kitchen was nominated for an Emmy Award for the powerful title sequence montage they designed for the HBO series *True Blood*, a series that explores the drama that ensues in the small rural Louisiana town of “Bon Temps” when vampires admit publicly that they are “real” and have existed all along among humans. Digital Kitchen’s title sequence provides an arc into the world of America’s rural South through a montage of complex images that evoke ecstatic religion, sex, violence, addiction, racism, and death: Pentecostal enthusiasm and topless dancing, a preacher healing and a carnivorous Venus fly-trap, a striking snake and a barfly constricting a drunk trucker between her thighs, a woman in black lace panties sinking sensually down onto a bed and two church ladies rocking in devout prayer, strawberry-eating children and children dressed up in KKK robes, a rotting fox and a midnight river baptism.

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True Blood producer Alan Ball, who previously won acclaim for his disturbingly beautiful and violent portrayal of American suburban life in the 1999 film *American Beauty*, creates in *True Blood* a phantasmagorical world of supernaturals: vampires, faeries, werewolves, maenads, shape-shifters, Voodoo queens, shamans, and witches. In the world of *True Blood*, vampires have “come out of the coffin” and begun to “mainstream” now that the Japanese have invented a synthetic (albeit untasty) blood substitute called “True Blood” that meets all their nutritional needs. As with the greater availability of foods such as Tofurky and seitan (wheat gluten) that technically satisfy humans’ nutritional needs and thus render human consumption of animal protein unnecessary, vampires no longer need to consume humans to survive. More socially conscious “True Blood”-drinking “vegetarian” vampires practice “temperance,” pay taxes, and agitate for civil rights to marry whom they please. The source of conflict in much of the first season is between bloodthirsty merciless vamps (who continue to kill and consume humans) and series hero “Vampire Bill,” a respectable (khakis-and-button-down-wearing) vampire who cultivates self-restraint as he tries to figure out the ethical limits of desire. Bill struggles to restrict his diet, feeding only (at first) consensually from his girlfriend “Sookie,” but even this limited temperance becomes unbearable since it turns out that Sookie is a human/faery hybrid, thus endowing her with irresistible faerie blood—the vampire version of “crack.” Human citizens of Bon Temps also struggle with the desire to consume, as they develop intense addictions to vampire blood or “V,” a drug that functions like a combination of XTC and Viagra, leaving the user with a voracious appetite for more. Both humans and vampires are consumed with the desire to consume, a not-so-subtle comment on America’s own vampire-like consumerist addictions.

In the series, “Russell Edgington,” the once vampire “king” of Mississippi, articulates most directly the ways in which humans’ inability to temper consumption makes them effectively no different from vampires. Edgington commandeers a television news anchor desk and proclaims on “live” TV to the nation: “We [vampires] are narcissists, we care only about getting what we want no matter what the cost, *just like you*. Global warming, perpetual war, toxic waste, child labor, torture, genocide. That’s a small price to pay for your SUVs and your flat screen TVs, your blood diamonds, your designer jeans, your absurd garish McMansions—futile symbols of permanence to quell your quivering, spineless souls” (“Everything is Broken,” aired 15 August 2010). Vampire, faery, or human, *True Blood* illuminates the compulsion to consume as powerful, erotic, ecstatic, and deadly. What’s more, in the fifth season of *True Blood*, we learn that consumption also constitutes a *religion*. Russell Edgington is part of a larger movement of vampires called the “Sanguinistas,” religious fundamentalists who oppose “mainstreaming” into human culture, read the *Vampire Bible* literally, and regard vampires’ consumption of human blood as a divinely endowed gift. The *Vampire Bible* states that humans are “no more than food” and that humans were created for the specific purpose of vampire consumption. According to the Sanguinista fundamentalists, vampires thus have divinely granted dominion over humans and can use them as they wish, farming them like veal, if they choose.

Benjamin’s dream houses, temples of utopian possibility framed in iron and glass. The World Trade Center’s remnants of dark twisted iron and shattered glass. The enchanted Edenic spaces of the American mall, promising kingdoms of bliss and

fulfillment. The mildewing abandoned retail cubicles of the defunct mall, enticing to urban archeologists and ghost hunters alike. Reverend Billy's playful "Shopalujah!" street spectacles and Jdimytai Damour's trampled corpse. *Big Love* and Black Friday. Wal-Mart's Christian service altar call and cash-register exorcisms. Kim Kardashian's silicone-pumped backside and Debtors Anonymous. Honey Boo Boo's world of painted fairy princesses and JonBenèt Ramsey's tortured ghost. A peculiar and probing parataxis.

Secrets of the Superbrands film directors Boome and Riley go to great effort to employ the highly advanced diagnostic technology of the MRI to probe the Apple Store fanatic's brain, seeking scientifically, objectively, and anatomically, to "confirm" the active presence of *religion* in his grey matter as he ecstatically views Apple icons and products. But the mystical dimensions of capitalism and the dialectics of the *féerie* and the phantasmagoria, the "religious" and the "secular," are as close as the "reality" TV show, the YouTube "haul" video, the supermarket celebrity tabloid, the mall down the street, or the veins on our necks.

Notes

- 1 Bertrand Russell attributes this to Heraclitis, as do others. Max Mueller writes that there is no proof Heraclitis ever actually said this, but that it certainly "sounds" a lot like something he would say (see Mulford 1885: 46).
- 2 In a treatment of similar sacrificial dynamics in the media consumption of child star Britney Spears, Kathryn Lofton (2011b: 351) observes of Spears's myriad dramas played out in the public eye: "The circle of paparazzi creates a fishbowl for viewers and readers to watch the banal, tortuously slow procedure of the kill. It is, then, a religious violence conducted under the guise of media consumption." I am indebted to Lofton for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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