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**MALLS AND THE HOLY TRINITY OF TEENS:  
PLEASURE, LEISURE, AND CONSUMPTION IN  
TRANSYLVANIA**

Malls have become social magnets for people of all social strata, young included, and, in this guise, they apparently emulate churches in their function of ritually congregating people at weekends or on Sundays. In the following we shall endeavour to read the city malls (in Transylvania) from a Cultural Studies perspective with the goal of showing that they function as cultural loci for youth congregation, as well as powerful agencies of identity construction. We aim to prove that through their ritual presence in malls and their consumption and reassignment of meaning to mall space (teens make special use of mall space quite often contrary to, or at least different from, the original intentions) adolescents perform and display self-identities. The underlying assumption is that consumption is symbolic and that teens in malls consume signs and meanings rather than just commodities. During the process, there occurs a construction of sorts, that of self- or group identities, for this is an era where young people increasingly define themselves through what they *consume*, be it commodities or signs. Our concern is with how malls are *appropriated* by teenagers, and how through the ritualistic pursuit of leisure and pleasure therein Romanian teens consecrate the function of malls of symbolising a specific world view, a system of beliefs, and a set of attitudes, very much like religion does. Thus, while primarily *secular temples* (now a commonplace syntagm for malls), malls may be said to epitomize the *sacred symbols* of young people today<sup>1</sup> although, at face value, they seem to tend to mundane rather than spiritual needs.

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**Introduction – Retail Boom in Romania and Its Impact on the Local Youth**

It could be safe to say that malls, as the central icons of consumption, play a paramount role in the building of self-identity, in an era where culture is consumption-oriented. We live in an epoch where consumption acts as an important marker of status, distinction and identity<sup>2</sup>. This becomes explicable if we view consumption, as suggested by Cultural Studies academics, as primarily symbolic. That is, since all commodity items carry symbolical significance in addition to their financial value, what occurs is a consumption of symbolic meanings<sup>3</sup>. The symbolic value of goods or items is actuated in the act of buying/consuming, tying in the individual consumer, deliberately or unknowingly, in a creative process of meaning negotiation and identity construction<sup>4</sup>. By buying commodity goods, the consumer actually makes a complex statement as to his needs, pleasure, and last, but not least, his financial potential and social status. Indeed, buying a single item alone can speak volumes about the social,

cultural and psychological profile of the buyer, even while it locates him/her on the socio-cultural map.

This unprecedented academic interest in consumption paralleled a radical shift in marketing which hailed the new (post-industrial) era: manufacturing and marketing swerved from mass-produced goods catering for everyone indiscriminately to items targeting a series of well-delineated niches framed by lifestyles or cultural preferences. Consumers became more selective and were encouraged to diversify and move away from prototypical purchases to the customized or tailored commodities that better fitted their desires or met their own peculiar needs.

The diversification of consumption was prompted by a period of a marked increase in personal incomes. In the West<sup>5</sup> a retailing boom occurred in the 1980's as facilitated by the explosion of disposable income and availability of personal credit among the young, the affluent and the middle class. Goods production diversified in order to provide for the rising and selective/individualized needs of emerging social and cultural niches. Consumption thus became more than a functional fulfilment of need. It was, and is, a significant and prominent leisure activity in its own right.

The former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe did not replicate the 80s western boom mentioned above for the obvious political reasons. If procrastinated by a decade and a half, when eventually triggered by the political and economic changes following the radical shift from communism to capitalism, the asynchronous eastern retail boom made a quantum leap recuperating the delay with a frenzy characteristic of economically frustrated nations. As with all countries in post-industrial political, social and economic transition, many fortunes were made here literally overnight, and the local black and grey markets prospered. The void of economic regulations and the legislative instability and oscillations encouraged by the alternation to power of parties or political alliances of varied leanings with, perhaps, insufficient tradition or unclarified ideologies contributed, too, to a situation where some were able to accumulate material wealth unnaturally fast and were willing to dispose of it just as rapidly.

The emergence of these overnight-made fortunes was, in time, superseded in breadth by a new socio-economic phenomenon spurred by the temporary<sup>6</sup> economic emigration from the *East* to the *West*. The massive export of Romanian labour force to Spain and Italy (later to Ireland or the UK), of the past two decades, brought about important changes in the consumption patterns of Romanians at home or in the diaspora. Young as well as middle-aged adults sought, and are still seeking, employment across the border, in areas that promise 'decent' wages and lifestyles as compared to those in the home country offering no prospect of betterment in the very near future. Moreover, it would seem that all of the subsequent governments endorsed, perhaps not publicly, this massive

labour move westward due to the economic problems post-communist Romania was struggling with. It was reckoned that the high unemployment rates characteristic of such stages can be lowered by exporting labour.

A direct consequence has been that most of the self-exported individuals are in the habit of regularly sending sums of money home to the children/teens left behind in the care of the remaining family (grandparents/aunts, etc.). This same money has a higher financial value in the domestic country (at least, it had for some time) than in the country where it is earned due to the currency exchange rate, so that the teens/children left behind and whose wellbeing justified the parents' self-imposed exile found themselves disposing of sums of money that allowed them to consume in 'excess' as compared to the 'regular' families. Needless to say, the money coming into their possession is meant as a sort of psychological substitute for parental absence.

Our intention here is to make a point that this excess money made available by 'exiled' parents has rapidly oriented Romanian teens<sup>7</sup> towards malls, the retailing and cultural milieus produced by the post-modern urban environments, and that their ritual consumption of malls as providers of commodities and day-time accommodation have turned the latter into a veritable icons for adolescents here (as elsewhere). We also hope to prove that the presence and interaction patterns of young people in malls resemble the ritualistic conduct elicited or inspired by sacred settings and that, perhaps, the iconic presence of malls in the new metropolis has come very close to replacing symbolically, but also literally, churches as the magnets of Sunday (weekend) congregation. Thus, as new patterns of consumption are being implemented in the fresh democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, teens in Transylvania seem to rapidly conform to the observance of (new) rituals<sup>8</sup> as elicited by malls.

### Post-Fordism and Youth Identity

To some theorists it is natural that we should tie the concept of identity, which is an essential issue with adolescents, with the theoretical and practical idea of consumption. According to the ideology of consumerism, self-identities are today prevalingly formed and maintained via consumption<sup>9</sup>. The radical shift from Fordism, associated with mass-production of standardised goods for consumption by the 'masses,' to post-Fordism, which is associated with small scale units of production producing non-standardised goods tailored to the tastes of particular groups of consumers, has triggered among social anthropologists and cultural students a new turn into the interpretation of identity formation<sup>10</sup>. It follows logically that youth identity too may/should be reinterpreted along this new line.

A brief survey of the issue shows that over the years there have been many attempts at defining the terms *youth culture* and *identity*. The varied and often differing ways in which adolescents and young adults have been conceptualised, either as individuals or as groups, speak of the complexity of the subcultural phenomena. Thus, early students of subculture (The Chicago School of Sociology in the 60s) envisaged and theorised youth as fundamentally deviant. In the mid-1970s, however, there came to the fore the work of a group that programmatically distanced themselves from this totalising and ‘demonising’ perspective of youth by insisting, instead, on the complexity and diversity of the youth-related phenomena. This radical shift of perspective was assumed by the authors whose independent and collective works came to be called the Birmingham Tradition, encompassing the joint studies of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK. The leading members of the group embarked on empirical studies of subcultures in the UK (the *Teds*, *Mods*, *Rockers*, *Skinheads* and *Punks*) and their sociological finds were presented as an act of justice to the until then misconceptualised ‘culture’ of young people. The underlying explicative frame was the Gramscian theory of hegemony focusing on the forms of rebellion expressed by certain youth groups against the mainstream. In a nutshell, the youth were seen as defining themselves mainly through opposition or resistance to the parent culture.

The 80s were dominated by the students of the youth-related phenomena that more or less declared that subcultures had ceased to exist. The assertion was underpinned by a seminal, yet commonsensical, find that the rebellious and deviant youth had turned passive and conservative. However, according to Widdicombe and Woffitt<sup>11</sup>, that was not at all the case but that, perhaps, the subcultural formations were less visible and notorious.

Eventually, the 1990s marked an important academic realisation which acknowledged the role of cultural artefacts and leisure in the formation and maintenance of subcultures. It was noted that youth culture had at the centre a leisure-based culture of pop music, fashion and leisure activities<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, many of the socio-economic problems faced by the young people were offered a symbolic solution by the subcultures<sup>13</sup> themselves. This symbolic solution meant the *appropriation of commodities* already invested with meanings, associations, and social connotations by the dominant culture. Basically, what the different subcultures operated was a re-location of meanings within the sub-cultural realm, or a *space-bricolage*<sup>14</sup>. The process, it would seem, caused an undermining of conventional meanings and a reordering objects<sup>15</sup> which was not random but in tune with the group’s focal concerns<sup>16</sup>.

Rather than passive or easily manipulated, young consumers have been found to be creative and critical in their appropriation and transformation of material artefacts in everyday creative and symbolic

practices. Moreover, apparently consumer culture positively benefits the quest for identity in youth fully allowing for identity experimentation, self-discovery, asserting difference from the adults<sup>17</sup> or from other teens. Perhaps the most notable of the current consumer and marketing evolutions, as well as a sound argument for the point above, is the fact that boys and men have become (and, thus, superseded girls and women) the prime retailing target and that they are “at the aspirational heart of advertising style<sup>18</sup>.”

Thus, far from plunging young people into an even deeper identity crisis (as is deemed characteristic of their age group), Post-Fordist capitalism has apparently liberated them. Due to the proliferation of consumer goods, and, with them, of consumer choices, teens, as everyone else, are free to choose who they are and what they want to become<sup>19</sup> through what they consume. Consequently, part of our focal argumentation in this paper rests fundamentally on proving the capacity of consumer culture to cater for youth by offering them choices which allow them to express their self- or group-identity as different from others<sup>20</sup> and on how malls as epitomes of the freedom of consumer choice articulate the ritual weekly activities of teens which revolve around consumption and leisure. This, we hope, will, in turn, further support our prime argument that the closely knit connection between malls, consumption and identity transcends the worldly environment and determines the set of attitudes expressed by teens in varied ways that distinguish them as a socio-cultural group apart.

### Malls in the Post-modern Cities: a Local Reading

Not only do malls regulate teens' weekly leisure activities but they are also the central foci of the adults' more (yet not entirely) utilitarian interests. Albeit for different reasons than the adolescents' own, their parents also visit malls on a weekly basis. Perhaps this is where we should add an input as to how malls have become important milestones in the urban dwellers' existence.

Malls are architectural and commercial units that have become an essential constituent of the post-industrial metropolis<sup>21</sup>. The main characteristics of the post-modern or post-industrial city have been poignantly and concisely summarized<sup>22</sup> mainly by contrast to the modern city, as follows: a chaotic multinodal structure with highly spectacular centres, a collage of architectural styles, both spectacular and playful as opposed to the homogeneous functional zoning with a dominant commercial centre and functional architecture of the modern city. This physical and dramatic de- and then re-construction of the city in the post-industrial era has been closely followed by deep cultural and social rifts and realignments. The clear-cut class divisions and the subsequent homogeneity within each group of the modern era have been replaced by a

different sort of polarisation, where groups and their lifestyles are mainly defined and determined by their patterns of consumption. Therefore, in the post-modern city malls are central icons which in addition to their tangible commercial function can be seen as playing a symbolic role as well.

The deep social, economic and cultural shifts of post-industrialism are notably not the outcome of a swift process, nor are they left unchallenged. *Au contraire*, they are frequently contested or misread rather than accepted by social groups. Not surprisingly, then, the Romanian teens, too, may and do give malls alternative readings and uses that fit a local subjectivity. Given their polysemy, malls in Romania, as elsewhere, are the hallmarks of the secular beliefs of the local youth, for they contribute symbolically and systematically to the definition of young people. Furthermore, the teen's patterns of consumption of mall space and consumer goods are suggestive of certain attitudes, and, by extrapolation, of a world view, while their ritual presence in malls serves to reinforce their distinctive culture concretely in the face of adult visitors and mall managers, *the regulators of 'mall-conduct'*.

### Consecration of Malls through Youth Appropriation

While the presence of teens in malls is a universal constant, adult awareness of the fact is not always favourable. Moreover, even if the market strategists also gained an awareness, however, of the spending potential of this age group, general attitudes towards teens in malls are still non-benevolent as a rule, unless adolescents are there to spend money rather than consume space by meeting friends and hanging around. On the other hand, malls are specifically designed as places where not only retail items may be consumed but so may space and the cultural events housed within. For instance, the mall space is deemed congenial for pop art events such as pop and rock band mini-concerts and festivals (e.g. Iulius Mall or Polus Mall in the Romanian city of Cluj Napoca have been the venues for shows featuring Romanian bands and solo artists, as well as for high-brow art exhibitions or concertos by the local Philharmonic Orchestra). Indeed, this is but one of many strategies meant to enhance the malls' attraction to customers of varied social and cultural backgrounds. Malls also incorporate fast food courts, cafeterias and cinemas, a conglomerate of vehicles for needs gratification specifically intended to persuade clients to spend the whole day in the mall by multiplying and diversifying the range of activities within.

In fact, this issue is a permanent priority for mall owners and managers, so much so that inside or specialist studies are conducted so as to constantly renew strategies for attracting and keeping clients in malls. Thus, a like study<sup>23</sup> conducted on the shopping mall preferences of American teens between 12 and 17 years of age has indicated that the most

important attributes in teens' choice of a mall to frequent are how friendly and welcoming the mall is to teens and whether the mall contains "cool" stores. The study found that the "ideal" mall, in most respondents' opinion, was the one that has "lots of" everything, is a good place to hang out with friends, and is very attractively designed.

Teens confess to the fact that their presence in malls is not motivated strictly by shopping<sup>24</sup>. Teens like to "hang-out" at malls and meet their friends, and it has been found<sup>25</sup> that the social aspects of the mall, such as visiting and shopping with friends, are major activities for teens. How conducive the mall is to these activities seems to make a difference in the level of money spending on the part of teens.

While efforts are avowedly made to conceive of ways that should make malls ever so attractive to adolescents, teens themselves make their own specific uses of the space made available. Space in general is essential to subcultural displays (teens regularly 'encroach upon' regulated space in order to make their presence felt and to express attitudes) and urban and mainstream space is regularly appropriated by the young particularly in the absence of 'official' approval. Not surprisingly, then, malls with their generous space have become important cogs in the inner works of youth identity. Indeed, places can be conceptualised in terms of the complex interacting social relations where both individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in an effort to territorialise, to claim spaces. Thus, the design, definition and control of spatiality is an active ingredient in the social process of identity construction<sup>26</sup>. Yet, we have to have to make allowance for the fact that it is the 'authorities' who create and enforce the rules for the spatial ordering of the population in terms of age (e.g. teenagers are not allowed in children's playgrounds or in certain clubs, drinking places or cinemas).

In the spirit of ethnographic and geography studies it has been noted that teenagers find the public/adult spaces to be the one autonomous space they can carve out for themselves, and that hanging around or congregating on the streets, in the parks and, more persistently, in the shopping malls is a form of youth resistance to adult power<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, space, just like commodities, is open to a double inflection: to 'illegitimate' as well as 'legitimate' uses<sup>28</sup>. It can be appropriated by young (subordinate) groups and made to carry secret meanings, which in code express a form of resistance to the (mainstream) order.

Use of malls as *shopping* space is quite important in the definition and assertion of the subordinate group of teens. Very much alert in their effort towards self-assertion through resistance and even opposition to the normative adult world, they have obviously seen in shopping the vulnerable area where the weak can inflict damage on the strategic interests of the powerful. The young are seen as "shopping mall guerrillas"<sup>29</sup>, a syntagm connoting combat and sabotage. In spite of the fact that many teens and young people (Romanian included) have an increasing



money-spending potential, the mainstream view of their activities in malls is rather negative as noted above (see recent banning<sup>30</sup> of teens from malls in the USA).

Here are some labels and comments posted on the Internet regarding young people's general presence in and their use of malls, expressing the mainstream attitude towards their patterns of behaviour:

Mall: a shopping center most commonly used to kill time and parents money in suburbia  
*"Mooom, Dannie and I are going to the mall. Can I have some cash?"*<sup>31</sup>

A place where teenagers go to waste their lives away.

*"Dude, you wanna go to the mall?"*

*"Yeah, dude!"*

*"Sweet!"*

*"Dude!"*<sup>32</sup>

Mall rat: A surly teenager who spends all of his or her time at the mall with friends. Typically seen standing around glaring at customers – sometimes these fascinating creatures will pick fights with mall security and call them "fascist" for enforcing the mall's loitering bylaws...<sup>33</sup>

Usually preteens who have nowhere else to go on Friday or Saturday nights since they don't have cars and cant get anywhere anyway. These youngsters walk around the mall for hours at a time, and usually do not make one single purchase. Also, female mallrats us[u]ally wear the sluttiest clothing ever. These girls actually think that there are people to impress at the mall and that they will somehow meet their dream man there.

I went to the mall to get new shoes on Friday and I saw the same mall rats pass by me at least ten times!<sup>34</sup>

## Malls as Shelter

If their presence in malls is perceived by some as a nuisance and mainly as loitering, adolescents themselves have found more complex uses for 'mall-ing' rather than simply a favourite pastime. Teens explicitly seek



out shopping malls that can deliver one or more of four types of experiences: entertainment, esthetic, escapist or educational<sup>35</sup>. However, it should be noted that most of the malls in the region of Transylvania fail to fulfil the educational purpose. Few, if any, have reached the evolutionary 'mall stage' where they use a refined combination of the four functions to cater for their clients.

Yet, an additional function seems to have been omitted from the list: the fact that malls are perceived as, and provide, *safe* places par excellence. Thus, just as churches perform the symbolic and literal function of providing haven to people in distress, even in some sort of physical danger (examples abound in literature but also in real-life accounts of wartime episodes, etc.), so do malls seem to be providing some peace of mind to parents who would have their teenage children spend time in malls rather than on the streets or in underground clubs. Every mall employs security personnel to keep malls free of irregular behaviour (vagrants, solicitors, and even rowdy youngsters)<sup>36</sup>. The safety and respectability of malls attract many people and, apparently, teens, too, have perceived this additional attraction of the big shopping centres: ensuring a safe environment for the pursuit and consumption of pleasure and leisure without the risk of being challenged by 'rival' parties, as is often the case 'on the street'. Female adolescents seem to be the more perceptive and responsive to the additional secure milieu represented by malls. In the context of research on young people in the urban environment of East End of London, Pearce says that "... young women go to shops in order to see friends, to hang around and, in their words, to have somewhere safe to be"<sup>37</sup>.

Shopping malls are popular as daytime meeting places as well as safe environments for consuming space and performing shopping, the young people's focal activities in the era of consumerism. It would seem that, albeit from a prevailing, if exclusively, commercial purpose, mall managers themselves have sensed the necessity of providing a safe and civil environment for teens and other categories of public, and consequently, managerial efforts are being made to provide a 'teen-friendly' atmosphere, if only to encourage adolescents to linger and purchase more<sup>38</sup>.

### Malls and Cathedrals: Resemblance in Architecture and Design

Gradually, malls in Romania have become the *Saturday* loci of ritual congregation of the local youngsters living in the former working class neighbourhoods, although most of them are still brought up in the traditional spirit of observing the *Sunday* church attendance. A parallel between malls (the secular Saturday cathedrals) and cathedrals *per se* will reveal a number of similarities between the two<sup>39</sup>.

Thus, architecturally, through their ample display and grandeur of space malls may often induce a sense of awe very much similar to that experienced in cathedrals. While cathedrals exploit the vertical dimension, aspiring or pointing to the heavens as it were, malls stretch out horizontally covering space that lends itself to many forms of consumption, including to appropriation by the young “mall crawlers.” In fact, the presence of malls may be felt throughout the sprawling post-modern city. Generally located in the suburbs, malls will be advertised across the city through banners and signposts in a tentacle-like yet strategic pattern so as to conveniently reach all potential clients, and while churches attract or signal their positioning through tall spires, malls infest horizontally the cities, in a more insidious but no less effective way.

The resemblance between the secular and religious cathedrals does not end here. In fact, quite a consistent number of parallel features have been found<sup>40</sup>. Thus, malls have iconic displays evocative of the statues, paintings and effigies of religious edifices. The plant and fountain arrangements as the pervasive elements of mall interior design also carry higher symbolical connotations of Nature, Life, in addition to being evocative of the decoration of churches at religious festivals. The mall entrance itself is quite grand and ‘templar’ in appearance, announcing and promising, all at once, that inside some sort of this-worldly Paradise awaits the customer.

Both churches and malls are designed as awe-inspiring buildings, as symbol complexes. If classifying both churches and malls as broadly the same category may seem paradoxical, the former being spiritual and the latter hedonistic, let us argue such association with the help of cultural anthropology. Geertz<sup>41</sup> has noted that:

The sorts of symbols (or symbol complexes) regarded by a people as sacred varies very widely. Elaborate initiation rites, complex, philosophical tales, dramatic, shamanistic exhibitions, cruel animal sacrifice rites, large communal feasts – all these patterns [...] seem to one people or another to sum up most powerfully what it knows about living.

Designed as miniature self-contained towns, with mini streets and avenues bearing names for directions, malls provide not only for the social needs of teens by congregating people within their space but also for their affective and cognitive interests by supplying multiple experiences within a safe environment.

### **Malls – a Global Network of Secular Temples**

All and any local youth culture is the product of interaction. It is not a closed, local culture, but neither is it an undifferentiated global one. Across the world young people strive to buy into an international cultural

reference system<sup>42</sup>: the genuine trainers or T-shirt with a western logo, and where else are teens most likely to procure them if not in the local mall, the member of an international chain of shopping centres carrying items that are global currencies for the young.

Indeed, in terms of the commodity goods offered for purchase malls are practically indistinguishable be they located in Eastern or Western Europe. Such commercial activities as Festival retailing<sup>43</sup> – up-scale shopping within themed environments – ignore cultural and economic borders, occurring within any and all malls irrespective of their locality. Likewise, seasonal observance<sup>44</sup> of Back-to-school, Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, etc. shopping periods are synchronous across Europe or the world, for that matter. It can be said that the mundane overlap with the religious festivals, marking the retail peaks of the year and thus organizing a secular calendar paralleling the religious one with corresponding 'sacred' days to be observed. Such festivals are regularly announced on different media and thus seem to organize our purchase schedules or time (and encourage) our shopping 'sprees'. Their timing is thoroughly researched and marketing strategies across the globe configure the mall at a time like this as an entertainment destination, with an atmosphere that is distinctive or evokes certain feelings, or as a source and venue for recreation, for, it would seem, retailers who combine retail, leisure and entertainment provide a value-added experience for consumers<sup>45</sup>.

A student of ecologies and geographies may evoke the universal features of malls claiming that a mall in Cluj, Romania, may be very similar to one in Paris, London, or Moscow. However, we do have to note that another category of specialists have opposing views on the matter. Some local architects of Cluj were interviewed<sup>46</sup> on the issue and they voiced fairly divergent opinions. Thus, from their own specialist perspective, some considered the malls in Cluj fairly modest in appearance and design and, if compared to their western equivalents, somewhat deficient. Others, however, contended, with a trace of local pride, that the customers who have experienced shopping in the West and don't have a keen eye for architecture will sense no difference between the local and the western mall versions in terms of overall organisation. Specialist views notwithstanding, there is clearly a universal template for malls in terms of design, function and symbolic role.

Moreover, from a functionalist perspective, one may note some measure of congruency between the social and psychological roles of churches and malls irrespective of their geographic location. If religion satisfies the individual's cognitive and affective demands for a stable and coercible world enabling him to maintain an inner security in the face of natural contingency<sup>47</sup>, the mall and the activities within provide and reinforce for the individual a particular lifestyle and thus safely locate him/her on the social map. Experiencing a period in one's life when one

grope for answers as to his social and psychological persona, teens resort to malls as *the* social locus where they may find a mundane sort of guidance and at the same time exert the will to consume.

## Conclusions

Teens in Transylvania, like all adolescents across the globe, have found in malls a safe and creative place where they can articulate their individual and group identities. The close bond between identity and consumption is explicable and quite straightforward in an epoch where people define themselves mainly through lifestyle and consumer choice. For the teens populating the post-modern city, the malls are literally the icons to which they pay homage through ritual visitation.

The polysemy of malls ensures for adolescents a way of interpreting and negotiating the original purpose of the former. Teens visit malls for multiple reasons: purchasing commodity items, socialising, finding entertainment, all of which articulate a world view that is peculiarly theirs. Thus, mall related teen activities, which of late are closely monitored by mall managers and, more often than not, sanctioned by adult clients, are the expression of subcultural attitudes that often oppose or resist mainstream regulations. Yet, if perceived as perpetrators, they are also catered for by market strategists, who are clearly aware of their spending potential and keen pursuit of leisure that is at the core of the current subcultures.

Malls in Transylvania, as part of the global networking of shopping centres, are not only designed to inspire teens, along with everyone else, to buy but are also awe-inspiring with their grandeur in shape and size, paralleling the sacred temples and the large scale celebration atmosphere built up at religious festivals. By promoting their own mundane festivals (seasonal sales, etc.), the malls have set up a 'worldly' calendar that clients observe diligently. While the teens' regular and ritual visits to the malls evoke a religious subservience of sorts, they have also literally replaced the traditional Sunday church attendance for the majority of the dwellers of the post-modern city. Perhaps, the replacement occurred swiftly, for the malls have taken over some of the temples' material and spiritual functions. The security of the mall space, the communal pursuit of entertainment, the setting congenial to socialising and the pervasive congregational atmosphere are all suggestive of the grand celebrations and pilgrimages to the sacred temples of yore.

Teens in Romania, as elsewhere, ritually consume mall space in a creative way, for in the process they construct self-identity. During the same process they activate the malls' symbolic potential of acting as secular cathedrals and re-assign them meanings and uses that engage their 'sacred' dimensions. Malls in Transylvania, though members of a global chain, while displaying universal features they also reveal a set of local

functions peculiar to economies in transition. However, here as elsewhere they exceed their primary commercial role where teens are concerned: they are safe places where teens can congregate and perform ritual focal activities that are central to subcultural building in an era of consumerism.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> According to Clifford Geertz, "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood and their world view [...]" Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

<sup>2</sup> See Nigel Watson and his insightful and suggestive chapter title: "Postmodernism and Lifestyles (or: You Are What You Buy)" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad Lodziak, *The Myth of Consumerism* (London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Although such ideological dichotomies as the *West* and the *East* are obsolete, we have used them to refer back to an era where they were still in place and functional.

<sup>6</sup> Apparently, most of the 'economic' immigrants, although not fixing for themselves temporal boundaries, are not willing to make their departure permanent and admittedly leave Romania for a limited period of time within which they can accumulate enough to return and ensure a decent living for themselves and their families.

<sup>7</sup> Naturally, it would distort the truth to say that the only Romanian teens frequenting malls are the ones with parents working abroad. With the rising of living standards, more and more parents make money available for the teen family members.

<sup>8</sup> Erin Kenzie, "Browsing for Fulfillment: Shopping Malls as Sacred in Contemporary American Society," <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~bstraigh/AN490/ERIN.htm>, accessed 28.03.2008

<sup>9</sup> Lodziak, 62. However, Lodziak notes that this is an "impoverished" view of self-identity which ignores the other sources of creating and expressing self-identity.

<sup>10</sup> Lodziak, 20-1.

<sup>11</sup> Widdicombe and Wooffitt supply an exhaustive history of the subcultural forms. Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt, *The Language of Youth Subcultures. Social Identity in Action* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester. Wheatsheaf, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Widdicombe and Wooffitt report Sugarman and Hargreaves in their work. See note above.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke reported by Widdicombe and Wooffitt. See note above.

<sup>14</sup> The term *bricolage* is used in describing the process of stylistic generation. The term itself is borrowed, yet used partially and eclectically, from Levi-Strauss's own concept of bricolage: the re-ordering and re-contextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings, within a total system of significances, which already includes prior and sedimented meanings attached to the objects used. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1976), 177. Bricolage had already been used in relation with youth phenomena by the exponents of the Birmingham Tradition.

<sup>15</sup> Hebdige, a leading member of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, draws on Gramsci's theories of hegemony and rests his argumentation on the one domain through which youth makes a cultural statement: style. Hebdige claims subcultures are primarily subterranean and subversive, for youth consciously appropriate and subvert signs and symbols of the dominant culture as objectified in commodities and re-assign meanings to accommodate the subculture's own subjectivity.

<sup>16</sup> The term used is *homologies* and was applied by Paul Willis (1978) in a study of the *hippies* and *bikers*. He used it to describe the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of the group, its subjective experience, and the musical forms used to express its central concerns.

<sup>17</sup> Lodziak, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Geertz notes that men "are the focus of a shifting process of consumerization in which image overrides utility... The construction of male identity is now inescapably a self-conscious, playful and sexualized process, unimaginable in the 70s and 80s..." Geertz, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Lodziak, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Lodziak, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Hall, *Urban Geography* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, 82-84.

<sup>23</sup> Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner, "Teens and Shopping Mall Preferences: A Conjoint Analysis Approach to Understanding the Generational Shift Toward an Experience Economy" in *Journal of Shopping Center Research*, Volume 12, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2005.

<sup>24</sup> The mall, for many teens, is more than a place to spend money — it's a place to see and be seen, a place to entertain themselves, sometimes just a place to escape Mom's nagging. "Teens don't really feel like there's a lot of places for them. They don't want to hang out at home. They can't go to a bar or nightclub, obviously," said Rob Callender, senior trends manager for Teen Research Unlimited, a marketing research firm. "Malls nationwide are setting curfews for unaccompanied teens," posted 9/17/2004 4:31 AM.  
[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-09-17-teens-malls\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-09-17-teens-malls_x.htm)



<sup>25</sup> Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Doreen Massey, "Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures," in *Cool Places. Geographies of Youth Cultures*, ed. Gil Valentine, Tracey Skelton and Deborah Chambers (London and New York: Routledge 1998), 126-7.

<sup>27</sup> Gil Valentine, Tracey Skelton and Deborah Chambers, introduction to *Cool Places. Geographies of Youth Cultures*, ed. Gil Valentine, Tracey Skelton and Deborah Chambers (London and New York: Routledge 1998), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Hebdige, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Lodziak, 33. Lodziak uses Fiske's syntagm and his view of shopping as the site of political conflict and struggle.

<sup>30</sup> Michelle Jarboe writes that complaints from retailers, customers and community members have prompted officials at Akron's Chapel Hill Mall, USA, to take a new approach to young shoppers. Shoppers younger than 18 must bring along an adult escort - a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle or guardian - on Friday and Saturday nights. She remarks that the mall is not the first in this market to restrict youths. It seems that such measures were triggered by malls' management concerns about fights, disruptive behavior, foul language and loitering of large groups of teenagers. Posted on June 13, 2008 14:44PM, [http://blog.cleveland.com/business/2008/06/akron\\_mall\\_to\\_require\\_parental.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/business/2008/06/akron_mall_to_require_parental.html).

<sup>31</sup> maria mouk, comment on "Mall" in Urban Dictionary, posted on May 1, 2005, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mall> (accessed on March 28, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Dan Jakubek, comment on "Mall" in Urban Dictionary, comment posted on Jan 22, 2004, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mall> (accessed on March 28, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> doodievomit, comment on "Mall rat" in Urban Dictionary, comment posted on Dec 11, 2002, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mall> (accessed on March 28, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> prettyinpink, comment on "Mall rat" in Urban Dictionary, comment posted on Mar 18, 2005, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mall> (accessed on March 28, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Kenzie, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Watt and Kevin Stenson, "The Street: 'It's a Bit Dodgy Around There': Safety, Danger, Ethnicity and Young People's Use of Public Space in Images and Identity" in *Cool Places. Geographies of Youth Cultures*, eds. Gil Valentine, Tracey Skelton and Deborah Chambers, 249-265.

<sup>38</sup> According to recent research the perception of how "teen friendly" a mall is, i.e., how comfortable and secure teens feel hanging out there with their friends, is a key determinant of mall choice by USA adolescents. The teen respondents in the study by Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner have many suggestions for making malls more teen friendly as a significant number of study's respondents perceive a need for malls to provide a safe, comfortable area, separate from parents, for teens to "hang out" without getting harassed or asked to leave by mall employees. Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner, 47.

<sup>39</sup> See Beth Gill, "Temples of Consumption: Shopping Malls as Secular Cathedrals" (1999) <http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/temples.html>

<sup>40</sup> Kenzie, 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> Geertz, 132.

<sup>42</sup> Massey, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Hall, 94-5.

<sup>44</sup> Kenzie, 3-5.

<sup>45</sup> Wendy Bryce Wilhelm and Sandra Mottner, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Alexandra Groza, "Mall-urile noastre și mall-urile lor," Clujeanul, 24-30 martie 2008, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Geertz reports from Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* (Boston, 1948), 143.