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Emporia State: The Crystal Palace And Its Aftermath

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1999

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1999

The Crystal Palace is Dostoevsky's crowning symbol for the barrenness of industrial civilization . . . In the Crystal Palace everything will be provided, man's every desire will be satisfied, he will be insulated from pain — but the more he becomes the automaton consumer the more he will also suffer from excruciating boredom . . . The Crystal Palace is the supreme economic manifestation of the utilitarian, liberal-rationalist philosophy: and it is the bourgeois paradise.

— John Carroll

The Crystal Palace burned down, of course, in 1936. But like a phoenix, or dragon's teeth sown in the earth, it sprang up everywhere as the shopping mall.

May 1998

Earth First! amnesiacs complain that council plans to build 18 multiplex cinemas plus 1000 rooftop car parking spaces on the vacant site of the Crystal Palace break the understanding that further building on the site would 'reflect the style of the original Crystal Palace'.

Welcome to the Milton Keynes of the soul.

In the hothouse environment of the mall, designer label commodities hold their grand parade, showing off their trophies, their human conquests.

During previous centuries millions died due to a wasting disease called consumption; in the present century millions also die due to a wasting disease called consumption.

In the emporia state, production is concealed, energy congealed, eyes sealed and hearts annealed.

The UK shopping centre encourages inwardness. The elements and inclement weather conditions are banished, and the massed ranks of shops haughtily turn their backs on the hostile outside world. The chill wind gusting along the back alley should find no place here. And yet still the draught penetrates. For when shoppers look within they find a barren wasteland of commodities, and shiver as the wind howls through their empty souls.

Laughter is not permitted in the shopping mall, neither outbursts of joy nor corrosive mockery. Consumption is a serious business, and misery finds a ready counterfeit in solemnity.

Some women refer, only half-jokingly, to the idea of 'retail therapy': shopping as consolation for the fact that domesticated life is shit. If you can't change yourself or your world, change your image, change your commodities.

Thirty years of built-in obsolescence was condemned as a capitalist con; now both capital and consumers benefit from it. Capital maximises profit; consumers gain a pretext for consuming again and again.

Designer labels

Identifying with capital, acquiring a corporate identity – even during leisure-time, labour's twin. Paying to act as a mobile advertisement and to extend capital's empire to all time and space. An acceleration of capitalist fashion: a desire to connect with the increasingly elusive moment by purchasing a brand new commodity. 'Brand' – a term used for the branding of cattle as property, or human flesh for penal purposes; also indicates a stigma, as in the phrase 'the brand of Cain'. Ever murdered your kin? Ever feel you've been shopped?

The myth of postindustrialism

We inhabit the factory and the factory inhabits us. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the buildings in which we live, work and die, the books we read, the media we ingest, the ideas we think – are all factory produced. And yet chaos is everywhere. Even as I walk through the barren waste of the shopping centre, I look up and see the sun boiling, the clouds scudding by, a flock of birds veering across the sky – and I feel the exquisite pulses, flows and currents that flow through my body.

The capitalist imperative: adapt or perish

A third alternative: rebel!

August 1998

Shopping centre travel agency poster: 'Cut-price flights to the sun'.

Summer 1999

Total eclipse.