

# GHOST IN THE MALL: THE AFFECTIVE AND HAUNTOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF DEAD MALL RUINS

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## ABSTRACT

Dead malls haunt the internet. These malls are either left abandoned to decay, to be slowly reclaimed by nature, or are dying with few shops and fewer people, open but eerily empty and quiet. Dead malls are dreamworlds, portals to the dreams of the past (Buck-Morss, 1995; 2000)—a time when the mall was a mecca of mass consumer-capitalist society. The affects of these dreams imbue the mall—a sense of hope and optimism for a new world promised by consumer culture, global connectivity, and technological advances. But these promised worlds never arrived, they have fallen into ruin and nothing has come to replace them. An internet scene has grown in these ruins. They call themselves “dead mall enthusiasts”—an intimate public that shares and expresses worldviews, memories, and affects centered around the figure of the dead mall. Enthusiasts sense the affective intensities of decaying 20th century consumer-capitalist futures that haunt these ruins—they sense “hauntological affects”. The dead mall and its enthusiasts alert us to our affective potential; they remind us of our ability to imagine the future.

## KEYWORDS

dead mall, YouTube, Reddit, affect, hauntology

## What Grows in the Rubble and Ruin

One of my first encounters with the dead mall was on YouTube. I came across a video, “DEAD MALL SERIES: FOREST FAIR VILLAGE MALL Ft. Music by Dan Mason.” The thumbnail was of a mall – marked by a lack of people and shops, of life and vitality, of mood lighting, plants, fountains, and soothing Muzak. The video began with a shot that panned over a vast arcade and food court with kitschy 90s nautical themed blue and red decor, then zoomed in on signs with stock imagery of grilled sandwiches and smiling faces that have been stained with time, and looked up at a neon light – “GREAT STEAK” – switched off and sitting above a stall, eerily clean despite being empty. The sound of buzzing lights hummed in the background. A mallsoft track was quietly introduced as someone softly narrated, “Hey everyone this is Dan Bell, and this is my video tour of the Forest Fair Village Mall in Forest Park, Ohio.” There was a certain aura, a feeling – a pull of the chest, an uneasy and difficult-to-place sense of nostalgia. I was drawn to the feelings – the hauntological affects – of the dead mall.

During the late 20th century, the mall was considered a mecca of consumer-capitalist civilization (Dovey 2008; Ritzer 2010). It was an essential consumer interior in capitalist societies (Sloterdijk 2013) – as Jameson (2003) wrote, “The world in which we were trapped is in fact a shopping mall” (77). However, by the end of the twentieth century, the roof started to cave in, the dust started accumulating, and the mold slowly crawled up the walls. The exterior world began to intrude on this interior world of comfort and consumption.

Now we are left with dead malls, “petrified utopias” (Beauchamp 2018) that sit on the edges of highways and the peripheries of suburbs. By 2011 one-third of American shopping malls were economically viable (Scharoun 2011, 235). Changes in consumer culture and retail – the shift towards specialty, leisure, and entertainment retail spaces, the rise of Big Box stores like Target and Walmart, online shopping, as well as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis – have been instrumental in the decline of the mall (Dovey 2008; Parlette & Cowen 2011; Ritzer 2010; Scharoun 2011). Now some malls are either dead, left abandoned to be slowly reclaimed by nature, or are dying with few shops and fewer people, open but eerily empty and quiet.

Despite the rubble seeming dead and inert, ruins are lively places – places where unexpected things may emerge. I approach the dead mall like Anna Tsing (2015) does the abandoned industrial forests where matsutake mushrooms grow. Matsutake only grow in abandoned forests, in capitalist ruins, picked by communities mostly made up of disenfranchised cultural minorities. The matsutake alerts us to an important question: what grows on the edges of our capitalist worlds, in our capitalist ruins? Inspired by Tsing, I practice an “art of noticing” – looking with a hopeful eye at the ruins of dead malls. In these ruins are groups of enthusiasts for whom the mall was once central to their childhoods and communities. They nostalgically and critically reflect on the mall ruin many others have readily forgotten. These enthusiasts are like the matsutake pickers, exploring ruined capitalist landscapes in the hope of discovering what might grow in them.

While not all malls are dying, the figure of the dead mall haunts the internet – appearing in colorful r/vaporwave edits, in eerie TikTok videos of empty mall “backrooms,” and in urban explorations of YouTubers. Dead mall enthusiasts form an online scene, a digital intimate public that expresses and shares worldviews, memories, and affects with one another online (Dobson, Carah & Robards 2018). Enthusiasts document and discuss their explorations and experiences through photography, videos, and text-posts on social media platforms, such as Reddit and YouTube, and websites such as Labelscar.com and DeadMalls.com. I explore two online spaces where the dead mall scene appears – the r/deadmalls subreddit and the “Dead Mall Series” by the YouTuber Dan Bell. On r/deadmalls over 130,000 members post images, videos and reflections on dead malls. Dan Bell began to film dead and dying malls in 2014 after he noticed the slow death of his childhood malls in Maryland. He wishes to archive and, in a way, preserve these malls digitally (Garcia 2019). Bell is a central figure in the dead mall scene, whose YouTube channel has almost 600,000 subscribers.

To enthusiasts, the dead mall is a feeling. The vast open spaces of the dead mall, empty of people and life, is teeming with affect – the melancholy hallways, the nostalgic memories of childhoods spent in the mall, the lingering hope for the prosperity malls were supposed to bring. I use the concept of affect to focus on how the dead mall is felt and experienced rather than just what it means and represents. When analysing and examining affect through texts such as comments or video narrations, Massumi (1995) and Clough (2018; 2008) may caution that we are examining emotion instead. However, Wetherell (2012) proposes affect and discourse are deeply entangled (52). The privileging of the “non-conscious” and the “non-narrative” over the discursive creates a “fragile basis” for social research on affect (Wetherell 2012, 53). Instead, “...we need an approach to discourse which is eclectic and which stresses the relational, dialogic and distributed aspects

of meaning-making” (Wetherell 2012, 53). We affect, are affected, and attempt to express affect in our textual practices. Affect circulates throughout the networks and texts of digital cultures (Castro et al. 2021; Dobson, Carah & Robards 2018; Lovelock 2019; Rajagopalan 2019).

Enthusiasts use language to express their affective experiences of the dead mall in ways distinct from articulations of affect through emotional language. There are a few strategies dead mall enthusiasts employ to do this. Enthusiasts often relate the affects of one text to another. Take this comment from a subreddit post that asks if people find dead malls peaceful:

...for me, there's this sad serenity to these malls. like the sad serenity I get when listening to, "everywhere at the end of time," or mall-soft-styled music. it's the same feeling I get when looking at some photos of Chernobyl...

Beyond calling the mall sad and serene, this enthusiast evokes the feeling of particular music—the vaporwave subgenre ‘mall soft’ and the album “everywhere at the end of time”—to express the affects they feel towards the dead mall. Enthusiasts attempt to invoke affects in one another through creating these associations. In r/deadmalls, commenters encourage fellow enthusiasts to listen to certain songs while viewing dead mall imagery. Under a r/deadmalls post of a vintage TIME magazine cover, one commenter encouraged other Redditors to listen to the Synthwave song "Everything is Going to Be Ok" while viewing.

Even further, enthusiasts point to the unnarratable and bodily nature of affect.

Hi I was wondering if any of you get a weird feeling when you watch a dead mall video, it's hard to explain, but basically I feel emptiness in my chest...It's really weird, I can't stop thinking about those videos. Can someone explain to me what the heck is happening with me right now? (post on r/deadmalls)

Rather than examine the socio-economic reasons why malls died (Ferreira & Paiva 2017; Tokosh 2018) or the impact this has had on local communities (Parlette & Cowen 2011), I explore how the dead mall appears online, the affective reflections of the dead mall enthusiasts, and how these reflections open up critical potentials to reimagine the future. Dead malls, and the enthusiasts who are left to reckon with them, embody the shared affective experience of life amid the ruins of mass

consumption. Like the pickers who follow the autumn scent of the matsutake, the dead mall enthusiasts see, hear, and *feel* the decaying dreams and lost futures resonant in the dead mall.

We are all, in a way, dead mall enthusiasts and matsutake pickers—we all live in ruin, in the rubble of failed dreamworlds. Enthusiasts and matsutake pickers unveil ways we can further explore the blasted landscapes which have become our “collective home” (Tsing 2015). What animates this piece are three aporias or tensions I found in my research—a tension between nostalgic longing and critique, a tension between history-feeling and future-feeling, and finally a tension between dreaming and awakening. Each section examines these tensions as sites to explore the politics of futurity under capitalism and the potential of the dead mall and its enthusiasts to spur an imagination for alternative futures.

## A Nostalgic Gaze: Between Longing and Critique

The mall is an ambivalent and contradictory space—between past and future, interior and exterior, real and fake, public and private, and leisure and work (Crawford 1992 & Fiske 2011). The original mall architect, Victor Gruen, was himself a “contradictory” figure. Gruen saw the mall as a socialist-utopian experiment to build a space both for consumption and community, to bring sociality into what he saw as an alienated America (Hardwick 2004; Scharoun 2012). In his initial plans malls would not only have shops, but also community centers, children’s play areas, public eating spaces, exhibits, public events, and other social goods and services (Hardwick 2004, 134). Gruen wanted to sustain these two separate and opposing agendas. While Gruen later denounced developers who built malls catered solely for consumption (Scharoun 2012, 14), the mall continues to be an ambivalent space.

Crawford (1992) writes on this contradiction of the mall, “proximity has established an inescapable behavioral link between human needs—for recreation, public life, and social interaction—and the commercial activities of the mall, between pleasure and profit in an enlarged version of ‘adjacent attraction’” (15). There is a struggle here between how the mall is used by those who enter (a space for socializing and community) and the mall’s built space for commerciality and consumption. Spatial practices can escape and exceed the conceptions of designers and managers (Parlette & Cowen 2011, 795). As Fiske (2011) observes, every day mall practices “...negotiate these structures, oppose and challenge them, evade their control, exploit their weaknesses, trick them, turn them against themselves and their producers” (26).

The ambivalent nature of the mall is also apparent in the contradictory *nostalgic* reflections of the dead mall enthusiasts. Enthusiasts often struggle between feelings of loss and longing towards the mall and the space of community it once provided and critical views of the mall as a space of mass consumer-capitalism. Affective, nostalgic recollections reveal that malls have a central place in the hearts of their enthusiasts. Malls give limited but important spaces of autonomy (Fiske 2011) for women (Morris 1995), the elderly, and teenagers (Scharoun 2012), particularly Black teenagers (Chin 2001). Specifically, they play an essential role in local communities. With the rise of dead malls, enthusiasts reflect that the American suburb has lost one of its last community spaces. One enthusiast under a r/deadmalls post comments, “RIP Christown Mall, a special place in all the hearts of the Phoenix Metropolitan area.” Enthusiasts, like this commenter, often express their personal experiences of dead malls they live close to and emphasize the importance of these malls to the area. Local communities miss malls, even protesting to save them from destruction (Parlette & Cowen 2011).

Especially common in the comment sections of YouTube videos and Reddit posts are commenters reminiscing on their childhood and youth. Enthusiasts write that the mall was a space for them to experience freedom and independence for the first time—to socialize with friends, get their first jobs, and start dating. An enthusiast under a r/deadmalls post of a mall they recognize comments:

I lived near this mall when I was young. I spent my middle school and high school years going there. It was THE hangout on weekends. I have dozens of movie ticket stubs from all the movies I saw at Carmike Cinemas. I remember every spot having a store. Packed on the weekends and holidays. Eating at the Chik-fil-a in the food court...Working at an art gallery when I was 16... First dinner date at Spinnakers. As for so many of us, it was a place where we grew up. I'll be sad one day when they tear it down or turn it into something else. But I'll always have those memories.

This enthusiast emphasizes just how central the mall was to how they grew up and, with its looming destruction, the sadness they feel when they think of the mall being replaced. Many enthusiasts express feeling loss and longing for their childhood and youth, a space for community, and an older way of life. As one enthusiast expresses under a r/deadmalls post that asks, “Why do we like looking at/visiting dead malls so much?”

You know, the Grand Budapest Hotel has a subplot in which the building is essentially like a living person, a character, in our lives. It grows and changes and eventually dies with us. Our memories, our lives, and the hours we spent there escaping our parents playing video games at Time Out will forever be lost like dust in the wind.

It is more than just a building to those in the dead mall scene. It is living and breathing, growing and changing. The mall “lives and dies” with its enthusiasts.

Critics of malls see them as depoliticizing, exploitative, and even zombifying (Dovey 2008; McRobbie 1997; McGuigan 1998). Enthusiasts will often reflect on the environmental impact of these malls, such as this r/deadmall commenter, “It is just a shameful waste of resources, like a lot of posts on this sub. I can tell it was beautiful once upon a time, it’s just maddening that so much real waste is littering so much of our country.” This enthusiast, like many others, expresses anger, dismay, and frustration towards the waste of money, space, and materials the mall embodies.

However, these critical views do not negate the affection enthusiasts have for the mall. Enthusiasts attempt to reconcile these seemingly contradictory perspectives. They reckon with a ruin that is both a marker of the wastefulness of mass consumer capitalism and a place once central to their communities, childhoods, and lives.

A commenter from a r/deadmalls post articulates this contradiction between longing and critique:

Yes, they make me feel nostalgic and kind of sad for reasons I’m not completely sure of. It must be hypocritical because I’m pretty disdainful of rampant commercialism but I think malls in the 80s and 90s are just the best.

Another enthusiast replies and explains that this is not necessarily hypocritical:

I feel like malls were as much of a social hub as a commercial hub in many instances, so I’d argue it’s not hypocritical to miss malls while still being disdainful of greed is good commercialism of the 80s and 90s.

Dead mall enthusiasts’ expressions of nostalgia, their affective expressions of loss and longing, *underpin* their critical reflections. Enthusiasts have experienced the failures of mass consumer capitalism first-hand. They have grown up with the mall and now watch, in shock, as it becomes ready for the wrecking ball. The loss and longing enthusiasts feel is foremostly a nostalgia for the mall as a communal and social space rather than a consumer space. Spaces for community

and sociality are not found in the big box stores that have come to replace the mall (Beauchamp 2018; Parlette & Cowen 2011). The mall ruin is a testament to certain failures—not only the failures of mass consumer-capitalism, but also the failure of a certain utopian dream for a community space in an otherwise alienated American suburbia.

## Mall Dreamworlds and Catastrophe

“I think it is still hitting people with slow motion shock that the 20th century is really over.”

—Commenter

The slow death of the mall marks the mall’s shift from a place of hope, of future-feeling to one of nostalgia, of history-feeling. These two affects are fundamentally entangled—enthusiasts are nostalgic for the future as they linger in the “dreams of another place and another time” (Boym 2001, 41).

Videos and images of dead malls contain ghostly whispers from past consumer cultures—spectral traces of long-lost dreamworlds. In a video tour of the Owings Mills Mall at night, Dan Bell intercuts news footage from different eras of the mall with his video tour in the present. At the beginning of the video, he uses footage from the mall’s opening day in 1986. In the clip, the news anchor narrates,

...champagne, gold dust and pink feathers heralded in a new era for Owings Mills. Today’s opening of the Owings Mill’s fashion mall does not only mean a new high fashion place to shop, it also means lots of new development and jobs.

The mall promised to usher in a new world of prosperity and progress (Pusca 2009; Xavier 2018). Footage of the mall in Bell’s video bursts with life—the corridors and balconies are filled with people who smile and cheer as feathers shower over them. Suddenly the video cuts to Dan Bell entering the mall in the present—devoid of human activity, eerie, quiet, and empty. Bell pans over vacant arcades which seem to stretch for eternity (see figure 1), walks through entire wings of the mall with no stores, and looks up at withering palm trees.





Figure 1. A quiet dead mall arcade at night, screencap from *Super Dead, Creepy Owings Mills Mall at Night \*\*DEMOLISHED\*\** (Dan Bell, 2015)

Through this juxtaposition between past and present, Dan Bell captures an aura, a trace of an outdated dreamworld. Under another one of Dan Bell's videos, *Neon Dream Surreal Night Tour of an Abandoned Mall*, an enthusiast describes a particular feeling they had exploring a dead mall:

...have you ever been in one of these places and momentarily felt like you were surrounded by a thriving environment? like all of the sudden the mall was bustling with shoppers and employees?

There is an affective trace that lingers in these ruins—a presence of a long-lost past. Enthusiasts sense it.

Dreamworlds were the collective utopias of the 20th century (Buck-Morss 2000). Capitalist mass utopias imagined a world that transformed nature and overcame scarcity. These utopian narratives were expressed in consumer interiors. The material expressions of mass consumer capitalism, the promises of its new industrial power, were the 19th-century arcades Walter Benjamin encountered (Buck-Morss 1995, 5). Malls are the arcades of the late 20th century (Friedberg 1993; Jameson 2003). As Crawford (1992) explains, the mall was imagined as a utopia, one which provided housing, food, and an endless supply of goods (19).

Collective dreamworlds have ended in catastrophe; they have become ruins. Dreams of abundance led to the exploitation of people and environments, to the dissolution of middle-class prosperity (Buck-Morss 2000; Dovey 2008). Dead mall enthusiasts explicitly reflect on the catastrophic end of the 20th century and its associated dreamworlds. A comment thread from Dan Bell's video *Super Dead, Creepy Owings Mills Mall at Night \*\*DEMOLISHED\*\**, delves into a discussion on the death of 20th-century futures,

I think it is still hitting people with slow motion shock that the 20th century is really over. If you personally remember and experienced the excitement of the 80s when high end malls opened, it is so hard to connect that to what now exists, post-recession, post urban change, post internet shopping. In the 80s, this looked like the start of a big new world of wealth for everyone. In fact, it was the last gasp of 20th century general prosperity.

Another commenter replies, "Spot on! I live in Illinois, Chicagoland Area, malls that flourished when I was young, are dying. So sad man. I'm NEVER political, but we are in big trouble with the disappearing of the Middle Class." 20th-century prosperity has had its last gasp, and even those of us who are 'non-political' are left to watch in shock as these utopias collapse "into a burned-out nostalgia" (Beauchamp 2017).

Dead mall enthusiasts further remark that nothing has come to replace these dying dreamworlds. One commenter states in an r/deadmalls comment thread, "then without even realising it they [malls] seemed to represent something of the past instead of the future." Underneath an r/deadmalls subreddit post that asks why people are fascinated by dead malls, a thread begins a dialogue on this crisis. It begins with a commenter explaining why they enjoy viewing dead malls, "... they are a reminder that we are in a period of transition. End stage capitalism. what will we worship next as the golden calf is finally put to rest?." This comment stimulates further discussion. An enthusiast further down this thread asks, "Does end stage capitalism even exist or are we stuck in late-stage capitalism until it completely destroys the environment and depletes our resources?" Someone else replies, "not sure. i was hoping we'd move on to Star Trek instead of Mad Max." We were promised a utopia but, instead, got dystopia. Enthusiasts observe that dreamworlds have passed, malls have risen and fallen, and now their ghosts surround us. They reflect that future-feeling has become past-feeling.

The death of malls occurs against a moment defined by capitalist realism (Fisher 2009). With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent rise of liberal capitalism came the death of any competing ideology or reality (Fisher 2009, 6) and the solidification of capitalism as the first global ideological form (Buck-Morss 2000, ix). We face a contemporary crisis characterized by our inability to imagine the future (Fisher 2012; 2013), to dream collectively (Buck-Morss 2000), and attain the good life (Berlant 2011). As the refrain goes, it has become “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, 2). An enthusiast beneath Dan Bell’s video *From Decadent to Dirt: The Last of Owings Mills* comments:

One thing about this series that really creeps me out is that the malls are indicative of something larger going on in the USA and the rest of the western world. The world I remember from the 80's and 90's has been steadily dying ever since. The middle classes shrink...Every day the ghost image of times past grows stronger. I feel like these malls are dying along with our sense of place and perhaps even our hopes for the future.

Enthusiasts are grappling with the cultural shifts Mark Fisher also reckoned with. We went from attending mall openings that showered us in feathers and gold dust and promised a bright new world to being incapable of imagining a new world altogether. Capitalism no longer needs to convince us by creating dreamworlds because it has become a naturalized reality—it is a fact, not a value. There is no need for a utopian vision to sell to the masses, no reason to build collective dreamworlds or to create spectacular mall interiors to enchant those who enter. The dead mall scene expresses the experience of living in a world of capitalist realism—the enthusiasts know it and feel it. The hopelessness, shock, and sadness—these are the affects enthusiasts feel when reflecting on the death of the mall and its associated dreamworlds. Malls are dying along with our “hopes for the future” as enthusiasts put it.

## Haunting, Feeling, Dreaming: On Reclaiming Failed Futures

There is political potential in the memories of adults who watched on as their promised utopias in childhood became dystopias in adulthood (Buck-Morss 1995). Dreamworlds have been disenchanting; the dream has been recognized as a dream. However, critical nostalgic reflections are not enough to see beyond the closed

horizons of capitalist realism. There needs to be a reclaiming of collective dreaming (Buck-Morss 1995). Even though dreamworlds have ended in catastrophe, catastrophe continues with or without dreamworlds (Buck-Morss 2000). There is a key tension here, one between dreaming and awakening. This contradiction, I argue, is what animates the political affective potential of the dead mall and its enthusiasts. It is to awaken from the dreamworld of the mall and rescue the desire for social transformation that remains in the rubble and ruin. To open up a space for new alternative dreams to be dreamt—for new mall futures.

While the dead mall scene does not present us with a new world to imagine, one outside of capitalist realism, enthusiasts recognize and rescue the *impulses* of imagining the future. They are reminded of *how* to collectively dream, not only the contents of these dreams. When we find ourselves in a moment where we can no longer imagine alternative realities, being reminded of these practices acquires a critical potential—“When the present has given up on the future, we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potentials of the past” (Fisher 2013, 53). Mark Fisher presents the concept of hauntology to argue that failed futures, despite their death, persist in the present. Hauntology’s refusal to give up on the future has a political dimension because it does not accommodate capitalist realism’s enclosed atmosphere (Fisher 2014, 24). In a time of cancelled futures, we should embrace this haunting. To remember how to dream collectively is to begin loosening capitalism’s grip over reality.



Traces of lost futures bubble up (Fisher 2013) in the videos, pictures and sounds of the dead mall scene. Hauntological works are an artistic mode that bring outdated futures to the present (Tanner 2016, 36), through animation (Schofield 2019), film (Fisher 2012; Riley 2017), music (Fisher 2013; Cole 2020; Horta 2017; Tanner 2016) and even geomatics mapping (Zembylas et al. 2019). Dan Bell's videos are hauntological works. In the introduction sequences for his dead mall series, Bell remixes media from mass consumer-capitalist cultures. Videos of outdated home shopping channels, TV ads, music videos, and movies intercut with one another as vaporwave music that remixes slowed down and echoed out Muzak, Japanese city-pop, and 80s pop tunes plays overtop. In the introduction sequence for the video, *The \$100 Mall: The Disaster of Pittsburgh Mills*, youthful faces, neon bikinis, sandy beaches, bright blue swimming pools, palm trees and sunsets fill the screen with funky vaporwave music by artist Lush Crayon playing in the background.

What bubbles up in Dan Bell's remixed culture-jammed introductions are affects of past consumer-capitalist cultures. Bell reveals the pure joy and energy found in these remixed mediascapes. In the introductory sequence for Bell's video, *From the 80s to the 70s: Galleria at Erieview OHIO & Eden Mall NC*, Bell remixes an early 2000s Japanese advertisement for a new mall. The remixed sequence is full of color, smiling faces, wind machines, and young women shopping, with upbeat electronic music by "Robots with Rayguns" (see figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 (left) and 3 (right). Screenscaps from culture-jammed introduction for the *80s to the 70s: Galleria at Erieview OHIO & Eden Mall* (Dan Bell, 2017)



Bell's remixes teem with affect. As Koc (2017) writes similarly on vaporwave's "lifeworld,"

...in technicoloured hues, evoking a faded memory of a time predating the unemotional starkness of postmodernity—a place in a long-lost past captured on a discarded VHS cassette, a place where colourful expressions and frenzied cries of hope and purpose would burst across the cultural landscape (66).

These remixes of past mass consumer cultures are overflowing with affects that seem to burst out from the screen (Koc 2017), have complex affective intensities (Killeen 2018), and invoke an elation that seems impossible now (Cole 2020).

Recollections by dead mall enthusiasts on *how* the future was once collectively imagined are tied up with reflections on how this practice once *felt*. Haunting is an "affective operation" (Zembylas et al. 2019, 29). Enthusiasts' expressions of the dreamworlds of the mall almost always center on affect. Take this comment in a r/deadmalls subreddit thread;

the mood was that everyone felt that the 80s were the start of something. Everyone might become wealthy or at least middle class. A chicken in every pot. But instead, the 80s were the end of the old ways of doing things, the high point, and we misread the exuberance...

Enthusiasts reflect the "mood" of late 20th century dreamworlds. The air was different: from the "excitement of the 80s," or malls as "new bright & shiny in the '80s—a sign of our economic boom and forward thinking," and the "optimism of the 90s...[when] most of us believed society would continue to get better and better." A commenter under Dan Bell's video, *From Decadent to Dirt: The last of Owings Mills*, further expresses these feelings,

The 80s and 90s had a real sense of optimism. It was the beginning of "the future"—things were new and exciting. Music was innovative, movies were original and fashion was daring. People embraced the birth of the home computer and the arrival of the internet...

The future had a certain feeling. The dead mall scene channels, shares, and feels these hauntological affects. Through Dan Bell's culture-jammed sequences and dead mall enthusiasts' nostalgic reflections the affectual appeal of the mass consumer cultures of the past are re-evaluated. Atkinson (2018) writes that scholars

of affect must think through “[how] might affect be used in service to revolution and to what ends?” (v). Hauntological affect offers one avenue for social revolution—we need to remember how to feel, dream, and imagine before we set about building new dreamworlds.

As the enchantment of mass consumer capitalist utopias wears off, as the phantasmagoria of the interior world of the mall becomes transparent (Dovey 2008; Ritzer 2010), we begin to recognize “this dream *as a dream*” (Benjamin 1999). Buckmorss (1995) writes on the goal of Benjamin’s project, “A materialist history that disenchant the industrial dreamworld of commodities, and yet rescues the utopian desire that it engendered for the purpose of social transformation: this was to have been the goal of Benjamin’s fairy tale” (7).

In the dead mall the dream of mass consumer culture is disenchanted—the stores are closed, there are no products on the shelf, no running water fountains, no more vibrant exciting consumer interiors. And yet, as the enthusiasts’ reflections demonstrate, the utopian desires of the mall remain a spectral affectual trace haunting the hallways once filled with people and products.

Perhaps the social desire rescued is not the mass consumer capitalist dream of the mall, but what the mall was remembered for by those who continue to linger in its ruins—the space for sociality and community, a civic heart in the suburb. A dream not only held by the enthusiasts but by the original mall inventor, Victor Gruen, whose failed visions of the mall utopias seem to bubble up in enthusiasts’ nostalgic reflections. While some enthusiasts desire malls to be repurposed for capital—condos, luxury apartments, movie sets, and so on, many also want the mall to be repurposed for social goods—community spaces, study areas, libraries and housing shelters. In an *r/deadmalls* comment thread, one enthusiast remarks dead malls “...make me hopeful for more sustainable redevelopment projects that benefit the community.” One enthusiast further reflects under a Dan Bell YouTube video:

Malls and most retail places in general were very different as to how they are now. People went to them to purchase goods, sure. But they also filled a sort of community role as well. It wasn't uncommon to go to a K-mart of a mall and see people just sitting there, talking. not buying anything...It was the atmosphere, the tone...You walk into a Walmart and you just want to leave. It's cold, everyone looks miserable and the stores are completely void of personality or style...Could malls make a real return? Possibly...they will never be as profitable as they once were, but they could still fill a role as the community gathering place. A feeling that is slowly dying out in modern America.

What the hauntological affectual traces of the dead mall enable is not dreaming of more mass consumer spaces, but more spaces of community, an opening of space for collective dreaming outside of the capitalist frame. The hauntological affects of the dead mall and the enthusiasts who sense them remind us that our abilities to dream and “feel” alternative futures are always in play.

## A Manifesto for the Dead Mall

If fake plants, water fountains, and potted palm trees are simulations of nature within the mall, in the dead mall fake plants disintegrate, water fountains cease to function, and potted palm trees wilt. Like in a forest when a large tree falls and gives light to the small plants down below, the dead mall roof caves in to let the sun and weather through. And in between the cracks of the concrete, in the decaying elevator shafts, and broken escalators, nature thrives. Unlike the mall that must simulate nature, nature reclaims the dead mall. In dead mall ruins, lost dreamworlds and alternative futures emerge. We can envision a new world growing up from the bombed-out spaces and blasted landscapes we now call home. We are reminded that ruins are not just to be reckoned with but to be dreamed in.

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