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Dead Malls and Right-Wing Populism



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Abstract

This chapter delves into the captivating intersection of decaying malls, the pervasive influence of zombie narratives, and the sociopolitical landscape of right-wing populism. Dead malls, reminiscent of economic downturns and societal shifts, become the focal point for dissecting the complex sociopolitical undercurrents which reflect as well as fuel populist ideologies. The exploration of these decaying commercial spaces unveils a tapestry of economic distress and cultural nostalgia. Through the lens of zombie narratives intertwined with dead malls, the chapter articulates how these sites symbolize economic displacement and invoke a sense of eerie cultural loss. The uncanny allure of zombiethemed cultural expressions within these malls mirrors societal frustrations arising from economic disparities and perceived neglect by political elites – especially in the era of Donald Trump and his unique brand of neo-populism in the United States. This chapter meticulously weaves the narratives of dead malls and zombie culture with the ascent of

right-wing populism. It scrutinizes the parallels between survivalist tropes in zombie narratives and the libertarian fantasy of freedom from established norms that are prevalent in right-wing fantasies. The associations between zombie media, the mall as a symbolic space, and the valorization of individualism, self-reliance, and gun culture within these narratives become vividly apparent. By interconnecting dead malls, zombie narratives, nostalgia-driven music, and right-wing populism, this chapter illuminates the intricate dynamics shaping contemporary societies. It underscores how these seemingly disparate phenomena converge, fostering narratives that resonate deeply within cultural, economic, and political realms. Understanding this convergence becomes pivotal in comprehending the multifaceted landscapes of societal shifts and ideological movements.

Keywords

Consumerism · Zombies · Popular Culture · Right-Wing Extremism · Fascism · Nostalgia · Donald Trump · Mass Shootings · Architecture

Introduction

Perhaps more than any other architectural form, dead malls have come to symbolize the compounding economic, social, and political

crises of our present time. Dead malls typically conjure images of what one author (Hu 2022) describes as the “apocalyptic sublime,” evoking, among other things, the rusting, decaying, and eroding infrastructures of our cultural and commercial hubs of late capitalism, images punctuated not least by the gutted, skeletal remains of these once dominant retail leviathans. Dead malls pockmark the already economically and ecologically devastated geography of the United States, standing as so many mute symbols of neoliberal catastrophism. As Lefebvre (1992) once put it, “society—that is, capitalist society—no longer totalizes its elements, nor seeks to achieve such a total integration through monuments. Instead it strives to distill its essence into buildings” (p. 232). The blown-out, neglected body of the dead mall *is* this essence.

According to one design critic, “the language of the undead permeates all the retail reportage” of these strange architectural behemoths (Lange 2022, p. 188). But what makes a dead mall *dead*? Dead malls are enclosed shopping centers which have fallen into desuetude and disrepair in the wake of financial crisis, taking on something of an aesthetic afterlife once they have been shuttered. The metaphor of a zombie mall is also sometimes used to describe these sites which persist in an undead form after being closed. These strange structures have become popular attractions for urban explorers, cultural theorists, musicians, filmmakers, and others fascinated by the lure of nostalgia and the disturbing, uncanny images they summon to mind. As Joshua Wilkerson writes, “no amount of ruin-porn can ease the eerie sensation that violent crime and restless spirits seem to lurk in the rubble of the dead mall, that order has been warped, that everyone and everything is, weirdly, implicated” (Wilkerson 2022). Dead malls represent something of a totality; an all-encompassing view of economic and social ruination.

Zombie Malls and Zombie Populists

It is no wonder why these macabre retail ruins so often appear in popular media, from mainstream and independent cinema, urban exploration (or, “UrbEx”) videos on YouTube, to music, literature,

and even video games. And it is equally no wonder why zombie narratives seem almost umbilically linked to representations of the dead mall. Luckhurst (2015) observes how zombies have come stand in for numerous social and cultural forms, functioning as a “‘mass metaphor,’ a metatope, ‘a figure that binds together other figures in a dense network of meanings’” (p. 9).

Zombie thrillers such as George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) – famously set in Pennsylvania’s Monroeville Mall – provided early commentary on the “undead” consumer culture afflicting modern life. The “trancelike nature of mall shopping,” and what Lange describes as the “Gruen Transfer” (named after Victor Gruen, the architect who designed the modern shopping mall), that is, “the moment when your presence at the mall tips from being goal-oriented. . . into a pleasure in itself,” makes the metaphor of the zombified consumer seem readymade, as though the architecture instrumentalized the desires of the witless mall goer (Lange 2022, p. 187; p. 30).

This critique of consumerism can be found in contemporary literature as well, such as Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s short story “Friday Black,” which allegorizes the zombified shopper for the twenty-first century. Set in a shopping mall, Adjei-Brenyah characterizes consumers violently biting, trampling and even killing others while trying to hunt down deals on Black Friday, a bizarre retail holiday in the United States. “Friday Black” puts a new spin on the dead mall phenomenon by reimagining the mall as a space of retail brutality resulting in death. Adjei-Brenyah’s story is not as speculative as one may think, given the very real violence that takes place annually on Black Friday. The website “Black Friday Death Count,” in fact, keeps track of this violence (<https://blackfridaydeathcount.com/>).

Dead malls often function as places of refuge in contemporary zombie narratives, such as Ling Ma’s novel *Severance* (2018), AMC’s television series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015-) and HBO’s *The Last of Us* (2023-). These narratives feature dead malls as utopian settings complete with all the basic amenities needed to survive a zombie apocalypse. However, dead malls in these shows also serve a dystopian function, becoming sites of

entrapment and confinement when characters are confronted by zombie hordes within them. Dead malls also function as nostalgic set pieces for characters as well as audiences alike, most notably in *The Last of Us*, which incorporated themes of youth through the use of a video arcade, a carousel, and adolescent, coming-of-age romance. One variation on the dead mall as a place of refuge can be found in the film *Gone Girl* (2014), though instead of traditional zombies, drug users occupy the interior of a disused Ohio mall, a commentary on the drug and overdose epidemic tragically affecting the Midwest United States.

The popularity of zombie narratives and the fascination with dead malls make sense in the age of neo-populism, and one wonders how Luckhurst's (2015) rumination on "massification," that is, on "the undead as multitude," might instruct us to rethink the contemporary forms of right-wing neo-populism of the present era (p. 10). Is there a deeper connection between dead malls, their undead occupants, and contemporary politics?

One connection can be explained by the prevalence of right-wing fantasies very often found in these narratives. Zombie narratives offer audiences survivalist, "last man" scenarios; a post-apocalyptic, libertarian desire for freedom from the grips of governmental rule, social codes, and perceived tyranny. This is perhaps why the protagonists, antagonists, or other major characters in zombie narratives, with exceptions of course, are very often ex-military or ex-police, such as in *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022). Contemporary zombie narratives exhibit forms of individualism, showcasing, for instance, the values of self-reliance, and, of course, may also function as advertisements for gun culture, the prime weapon of choice in contemporary zombie media.

We find these sorts of overlapping political and social themes in video games such as *Dead Rising* (2006), which is set in a mall in the wake of a zombie apocalypse. The protagonist must survive making use of whatever the mall makes available to him. Notably, the player is granted extra points for attacking and killing looters, and thus the game rewards on the basis of exercising the

right-wing ethos of vigilantism on top of survivalism. Malls give off an aura of self-sufficiency, as though they contained everything one would need to survive an apocalyptic scenario, making them uniquely suited for settings in survival games – an aura that makes dead malls ideal settings as well for right-wing fantasies to unfold on screen. (Two additional video games, known for their gratuitous gun violence, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2020) and the earlier *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), both feature retro mall interiors set in the 1980s).

Dead malls and zombies have this much in common: as empty signifiers, zombies tend to represent more than one social and political tensions from era to era; from the racial anxieties of settlers on the mainland living in fear of mass uprisings from the Caribbean after the Haitian Revolution, to the rise of consumerism in the twentieth century and beyond. For Luckhurst, zombies are the "official monster of the recession," which should not at all be surprising given how they have taken up an almost permanent residence in dead malls in popular culture, or, what we might think of as the official architecture of the recession (Luckhurst 2015, p. 149).

The undead masses and dead malls thus come to represent a certain confluence of neo-populist themes. While zombie hordes allow for an easy parallel with the rapacious "will of the people," the right-wing fantasy to abate this will, or to redirect it, often taking place in the interiors of the dead malls.

Neo-Populism and Right-Wing Extremism

Before dead malls, there was the birth of the modern shopping mall. In 1954, Victor Gruen, a Viennese architect, designed what we now consider to be the first mall: Northland Center near Detroit. After thriving for decades, Northland suffered during the 2008 financial crisis and was eventually closed in 2015 before being demolished in 2021. There is an interesting and as yet unremarked connection between dead malls and new populism, specifically of the right-wing

variety. It is not insignificant that the epicenter of the modern shopping mall, speaking of Detroit, Michigan, is also a major breeding ground for right-wing extremism and even neo-fascism. In 2020, several members of the paramilitary group the Wolverine Watchmen (which had ties to Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the white terrorists who were convicted for the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995) were arrested for plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the Governor of Michigan.

Anti-government sentiment runs deep in the veins of paramilitary and militia groups, particularly in Michigan, a state which has been subjected to economic and infrastructural disaster for decades; the Flint water crisis and Detroit housing crisis to name two prominent examples. Detroit in particular, once the capital of automobile production and the bustling retail mecca of the modern shopping mall, has experienced astronomical levels of financial hardship in recent decades. Although we can't draw a straight line between Gruen's first experiment with the Northland mall and the kidnapping plot, we should at least note the spatial and political contiguity between the two. There may not be a causal arch, but economic devastation and political extremism are part of the same social constellation; the former very often begets the latter. In this context, Rosa Luxemburg's famous slogan "socialism or barbarism" takes on an interesting valance: the designer of the first shopping mall, a socialist who conceived of malls as socially linked, communal centers – and who shaped not only the trajectory of consumer experience, but the actual flow of capital for decades to come – would witness his experiment devolve into a form of barbarism, complete with financial, architectural, and, indeed, real violence.

On 6 May 2023, a neo-nazi armed with an AR-15 opened fire at the Premium Outlets mall in Allen, Texas, killing eight people (some of whom were children) and injuring seven others before being killed by a police officer. The shooter sported tattoos of swastikas and SS bolts. He wore fascist insignia on his military-grade tactical vest that read "RWDS," or, "Right Wing Death Squad," a patch worn by members of the

far-right neo-fascist group who call themselves the Proud Boys. It may not be coincidental that only two days prior several members of the Proud Boys, including their leader Enrique Tario, were convicted of seditious conspiracy for their role in Donald Trump's attempted coup of 6 January 2021.

Right-wing extremism is on the rise in the United States, due in no small part to Trump's populism and its appeal to white supremacists and neo-fascists in the United States. Acts of public violence like what we witnessed in Allen are neither isolated nor infrequent. On the contrary, they have quickly become quotidian in tandem with the rise of right-wing populism: On 17 June 2015, just one day after Donald Trump formally announced his first presidential bid, the white supremacist, neo-nazi Dylann Roof entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charlotte, South Carolina, and murdered nine African American people, including the church pastor and state senator, Clementa C. Pinckney; the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, for example, in which a white supremacist brutally murdered Heather Heyer; the massacre in Buffalo, New York, in 2022, when a white supremacist murdered 10 Black people at a supermarket; as already mentioned, neo-fascist coup attempt of 6 January 2021; the Colorado Springs nightclub shootings which killed five, inspired by anti-LGBTQ+ ideology; and numerous other examples.

Trump's faux-populism is a far cry from the People's Party of the 1890s. What we're witnessing today couldn't resemble less the politics of agrarian workers organized against urban, establishment elites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This neo-populism is a conspicuously contradictory variety in which the professed goal to ouster the political and economic elites is espoused by one of these very elites, speaking, of course, of Trump himself. Although his brand of right-wing, neo-populism is as phony as the garish interiors and cheap furniture adorning his properties, Trump's vapid, conspiratory-laden ideology nonetheless manifests dangerously in politics and in public space through acts of financial, legal, and real, physical

violence. Trump is a real estate mogul-cum-populist who has directed the so-called “will of the people” against a manufactured cabal of global elites – a so-called “deep state” – through a discourse shrouded in conspiratorial, anti-communist, anti-semitic, white supremacist ideology.

Trump’s neo-populism, what one commentator incidentally dubbed “zombie populism,” represents one of the “the most reality-averse versions of populist campaigning yet developed” (Lehmann 2023). The grotesque admixture of conservatism, right-wing and white supremacist conspiracies like QAnon, and the so-called “great replacement theory,” as well as the mobilization of paramilitary foot soldiers willing to execute Trump’s demagogic demands makes addressing and combating this twenty-first-century neo-populist, neo-fascist front of utmost importance. Lastly, figures like Trump and his son-in-law and former senior advisor Jared Kushner have protracted this ideological violence in concert with their own financial interests as well as the financial interests of the economic elite through real estate speculation, including retail; it is not coincidental that the legally embattled Trump Organization owns Trump Towers Istanbul, which, among other things, features a multistory interior shopping mall, while Kushner has invested in the redevelopment of dead malls in New Jersey and Los Angeles, denying, in the latter case, the African American community group Downtown Crenshaw Rising from bidding on the property in order to build affordable housing units (Ross 2020).

Conclusion

In one episode of HBO’s *The Last of Us*, a zombie horde descends on the Massachusetts State House while Tess (Anna Torv), who is trapped inside, makes the difficult decision to sacrifice herself in order to save Ellie (Bella Ramsey) and Joel (Pedro Pascal). Tess decides to blow herself up in the rotunda as the horde enters, enabling Ellie and Joel to flee. It is difficult not to consider this zombie horde as representative in some sense of

the horde of right-wing insurrectionists spurred on by Trump who descended on the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021. It is also not insignificant that Trump’s right-wing populist coup took place on what is known as the National Mall, that is, the stretch of greenspace in Washington, D.C. on which is sited the Capitol building, the Lincoln and Washington monuments, and a host of other historic memorials and museums.

Lefebvre (1992) would describe the National Mall in terms of “abstract space,” which is to say, spaces redolent with “terrorizing political content. . . giv[ing] rise to haunted places, places peopled by the living dead” (p. 235). The National Mall is thus a type of dead mall, though one set against a civic backdrop haunted by the violent history of the United States, including white supremacy, slavery, settler colonialism, and imperialism. The identity bound up in the National Mall has become a beacon for neo-populist mobilization, specifically Trump’s “MAGA” or “Make America Great Again,” movement; a movement which shares attributes with the Lost Cause movement popular in the postbellum American south.

While the National Mall as abstract space tends more toward a problematic right-wing nostalgia for national identity, Lefebvre’s definition of abstract space also helps explain the prevailing overlap between zombie narratives and dead malls. Dead malls as abstract spaces appeal to a form of left-wing nostalgia, specifically a form of cultural theory inherited from the late Mark Fisher, whose wildly popular book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), influenced a generation of leftist critics.

Dead malls emanate what some cultural theorists, borrowing from Derrida (2006), describe as the hauntological lure of Western culture, “teem[ing] with. . . the ghosts of our past,” and, as Tanner (2016) writes, “remnants of history, national trauma, and our individual memories” (p. ix). Tanner, who clearly borrows his critical and rhetorical style from Fisher, writes on how “the tendrils of capital have. . .snaked their way into our nostalgia. Now, even our desire to escape and retreat into the past is commodified” (p. 59). One popular representation of this commodified nostalgia comes by way of vaporwave, a reflexive

musical genre critical of consumerism and neoliberalism, which is, ultimately, deeply entangled with the dead mall phenomenon. Tanner analyzes vaporwave as “music of ‘non-times’ and ‘non-places’ because it is skeptical of what consumer culture has done to time and space.” Tanner explains how “the source material of many vaporwave compositions is typically some form of peripheral or incidental music,” such as mall Muzak, “designed for playback at the peripheries of our daily life, rarely intended for direct listening” (pp. 39–40). This peripheral sonority highlights the atmospheric, abstract space of dead malls; their haunting, uncanny placelessness, and timelessness. According to Brown, dead malls bear “traces of lost futures” which “bubble up in the videos, pictures and sounds of the dead mall scene” (Brown 2023).

Though well meaning, this discourse on nostalgia presents a narrow-minded view of the dead mall phenomenon. By focusing on ghosts and hauntings, Tanner, Brown, and the disciples of Fisher more generally tend to flee into metaphysics while also overstating the ubiquity of the kind of commodified nostalgia in question. When Tanner claims how “in the West, the time for which we pine is before the twenty-first century, which arrived violently on September 11, 2001, and before the rise of the Internet,” he treats the West as monolithic, eschewing political, social, racial, gender, and other differences, as well as the fact that the West/East geospatial framing has been superseded by the division between the Global North and Global South (p. xi). While we should question what or who Tanner means by “we” in his claim, we should also question the quasi-religious inflection of this theory of nostalgia. When the economic and political stakes are so high in the age of neo-populism, is a discourse of nostalgia attached to the dead mall viable?

In order to understand the dead mall phenomenon more thoroughly, we must rethink the interconnections between retail consumerism, architecture, real estate finance, and the entanglement between state violence and populist politics in the twenty-first century. As Lefebvre already observed in 1974, right before the dawn of neoliberalism, “the violence of the state must not be

viewed in isolation: it cannot be separated wither from the accumulation of capital or from the rational and political principle of unification, which subordinates and totalizes the various aspects of social practice. . . within a determinate space, namely, the space of the ruling class’s hegemony over its people and over the nationhood that it has arrogated” (p. 281). What we are witnessing with the rise of neo-populism, which espouses its own kind of nostalgia for a white supremacist past, requires a deeper understanding of the spatial politics of dead malls and other like phenomena. Particularly in the era of ever-increasing public violence at the hands of neo-fascist, populist extremists, the dead mall is quickly becoming less of a metaphor or mere representation and more of a reality, as events such as what was witnessed in Allen, Texas, tend to indicate.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Cinematic Populism](#)
- ▶ [Economics and Populism: Neoliberalism](#)
- ▶ [Finance and Populism](#)
- ▶ [History in Popular Fiction: Twentieth-Century Writings](#)
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- ▶ [Relocating Populism and Populist Discourse in Dystopian Film and Fiction](#)
- ▶ [“The People” in Nationalism, Populism, and Popular Culture](#)

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