

Enlightenment in the Shopping Mall

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“Gold is a wonderful thing. Its owner is master of everything he desires. Gold can even enable souls to enter paradise.”

– Christopher Columbus in a letter from Jamaica

Imagine a world where people were held captive in a shopping mall for the entirety of their lives. Shackled to a patio chair in the food court, they would enjoy a nonstop diet of cheesy pizza slices and sticky cinnabuns. As they indulge their insatiable appetite, their hungry eyes would remain transfixed on the latest fashions displayed in the shop windows. Never being able to see their actual appearance, they would believe that they are seeing a reflection of themselves when they look upon the faceless manikins. In spite of their enslavement, the captives love their life in the mall, knowing that they are clothed in the latest fashion trends.

Imagine now that one of these enslaved consumers liberates herself from the restrictions of what to wear and what not to wear. For the first time in her life, she awakes from the dream world of glossy magazine ads and slick TV commercials. She hears her heart beat without the syncopation of the techno music that orchestrates life in the mall and smells the air without the overpowering fragrance emanating around the perfume counters. Thinking about her old mallrat friends, she feels a deep sense of pity – for how could they not love their Banana Republic fetters when this is the only life they have ever known? The liberated prisoner also loved her life in the mall. How could it possibly be that everything she learned from sitcoms and reality shows was a lie?

If our emancipated prisoner were now to enter one of the stores she used to frequent and shielded her eyes and ears long enough to make it to the backroom, she would discover a world never before seen on TV. Beyond the storerooms of the naked manikins and clearance items headed to the outlet stores, the emancipated shopper finds her way to the manager’s office. With only the faint base beat of the music still detectable as a reminder of the world she has left behind, she enters a room piled high with stacks of books inscribed with nothing other than sets of numbers. At

first, she is bewildered as she tries to work through all of the calculations; however, the more she analyzes the accounting ledgers, the more she understands their logic. Her confusion about her previous life is dispelled as the ephemeral world of constantly changing fashion trends translate into a rational order of mathematical certainty. All of a sudden, she is gripped with the supreme truth that all reality is unified in the economic system. While goods in the shop windows assume a manifold of appearances, they magically all dissolve into their primary substance with the swipe of the prisoner's credit card. Renounce all other gods; money alone is the supreme arbiter of one's substance and value!

How can this emancipated shopper return to her fellow mallrats when they continue to believe that money is only something they need to purchase their dreams rather than the Almighty Good? What foolish and deceived consumers they are who max out their credit cards as their appetites lead them! Their desires for goods will never be satiated: for the more they desire, the greater will be their credit debt. Shall she try to enlighten the other captives by showing them the true substance behind the world of appearances? Certainly not when she knows that she would be risking life and limb trying to cure the mallrats of their impulsive need to buy more and more.

Our enlightened prisoner, conscious of the real power of the purse strings, must reacquaint herself with her fashion-conscious friends in the mall; she does not, however, return to enlighten and liberate her former friends but to give them a makeover. How excited they will be to see their old friend when she greets them on the other side of the store window and promises them that their fantasies can come true with a mere swipe of their credit card. Our newly formed entrepreneur is not only welcomed back with open pocketbooks – she is treated by the mallrats as their savior.

While ministers implore us to place our faith in a God that we can neither see nor touch, the merchants in the mall can rationally demonstrate how the hand of the market makes the world go round. It is said that “You cannot serve two masters.” If the prisoner who has escaped the bonds of Madison Avenue and the Galleria is now to place her faith in anything, then she will testify to the captive and liberated alike: “In Mammon I trust.”