

Mall Rats & Bunnies

by Silvia Bombardini



Vetements X Juicy Couture

“I love shopping malls”. In her report on Vetements’ couture debut, Susie Lau quotes Demna Gvasalia: *“real shopping malls are the most inspiring places for fashion designers. I’m talking about real shopping malls where there is no fashion”*. But the real malls Gvasalia remembers are increasingly hard to find in the real world, or in the United States at least, where they once cropped up like weeds. And if most of us can easily picture what kind of mall he means – populated, fashionless – Vetements’ youngest fans, who can be very young, may well find themselves confused. Department stores like JCPenney, Sears or Macy’s, that used to draw Americans to the mall like moths to a flame, have witnessed a steady drop in sales for a decade now, as a new generation of shoppers, lazier and savvier, turn to Amazon instead. Indeed, online retailers that no one would rather do without were blamed from the start, in the same passive way one blames the rain – bad weather too, alas, is conveniently brought up to justify people’s reluctance to shop. Though far from blameless, however, e-tailers can hardly be held responsible all on their own for the fall from grace of the shopping mall. Ecommerce is just as strong in Asia, for instance, where malls are still in full bloom – to the point that the staff of some department stores in Harajuku, Tokyo, are local superstars: they called them

charisma clerks back in the 90s, and social media only pushed their influence further. Besides, not all American malls are obsolete. Those where there is fashion, catering to high rollers, still thrive – regardless even of a ‘see now, buy now’ alternative. Rather, it’s the suburban shopping centre that struggles. We’re all middle class now, it seems, except at the mall.

This wasn’t always the case. Take Kitson, the variously priced LA department store whose seventeen US locations shut down at once last year. In memory of its golden days in the mid-oughties, Vestoj recalls the celebrities who came to browse its racks, side by side with ordinary customers: Britney, Lindsay, Paris, Kim. “*The pre-GRC economy hadn’t yet tanked and so class felt superfluous as a pretense*” writes [Philippa Snow](#), and “*the people we wanted to be like were the people we were like, only richer*”. One might argue that young Americans have since become more responsible, suspicious of too cheap price tags, offended perhaps by the ubiquitous consumerism on display at the mall or shops like Kitson, and the sinister, subliminal ways it operates. Of course we can still count on bouts of millennial nostalgia toward the place, even when it comes tinged with critique. Like mallsoft, a niche music genre that takes its cues from Muzak – the background tunes that play on loop in elevators and high street stores. [Dylan Kilby](#) of Sunbleach Media praises *Hologram Plaza*, a mallsoft album by Disconscious, as “*some of the emptiest music ever put to tape*”, and goes on to clarify how “*the purpose of mallsoft is to evoke the feeling of walking through an abandoned (or hyper-populated) mall [...] to evoke the cavernous spaces within a three-story shopping plaza*”. But for some, the mall had long been a source of disquiet: think of George A. Romero’s foremost *Dawn of the Dead*, shot in the 70s, and the peculiar subgenre it inspired – for a gem among many, check *Chopping Mall* from 1986. And if it took the economic crisis, and less spending power, to persuade fashion, uhm, *victims* of the dangers and horrors in store for them at the mall, so be it.

Except that this soulless mall had once been a social venue, a space whose cultural relevance for American teens in the 80s and 90s, however unintentional, it wouldn’t be fair to forget. They were dubbed *rats* and *bunnies*, the boys and girls, progeny of the 19th century *flâneur*, who in the days before the internet idled the afternoon away at the mall, window shopping with no real intention to buy. Some believe it was their presence, at last, that discouraged proper shoppers from visiting, others that the stricter surveillance adopted in quite a few centres to keep them at bay, ultimately put everyone off. In truth, the teenagers who populated American shopping malls, annoying though they may have been, were also largely innocuous, and had probably very little to do with their eventual downfall. But though no apology has been offered yet for the mall itself, and Gvasalia’s praising is still at odds, as it’s probably meant to be, with the low opinion of such a place most maintain in the creative and cultural fields, a certain fondness for rats and bunnies on their own has nonetheless come to define a specific direction when today’s youth revisit those decades in their closet, and designers in their work, further away from the United States – see the latest menswear collections from Tourne de Transmission in London, or Palm Angels in Milan. It’s maybe their indolence that makes mall rats and bunnies so charming, whose pleasures younger generations may never again be privy to.



Mall Rats in Seoul, 2016, via [Vogue](#) – Tourne de Transmission, FW17

The mall-rat look is subtle enough that designers won't need to go out of their way to summon it up, what teens wore at the mall were casuals in the oversize silhouettes favoured by the slacker generation. Baggy jeans not unlike those of ravers, topped with puffer jackets and hoodies or untucked buffalo check plaid shirts, and terrycloth sweats or low-rise denim skirts, finished with shiny if usually uninspired appliques. Their brands would be American mall retailers: Abercrombie & Fitch or Gap, both of which have suffered the effects of 'unseasonable weather', or their younger sibling American Apparel, defunct in January 2017. Nowadays, on the catwalk and in the press, it's mostly a matter of styling and attitude. Inspired by a scene in *Christiane F.* and shot by Glen Luchford, Gucci's campaign film for SS16 features a group of young models running through a deserted shopping mall in Berlin, whereas the goth motifs in Marc Jacobs's FW16 collection become 'mall-goth', hence more desirable, because of their carefully crafted banality: cats, spider webs and indeed, rats. But the most outspoken of them all is Vetements without a doubt, whose SS17 collection can be credited with bringing Juicy Couture's infamous velour tracksuit off the museum's shelves – a 2004 pink model is actually exhibited in *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear*, at the Victoria & Albert museum until March 12 – and back into our wardrobes. And this years after the company closed down all of its stores in the United States, back in 2014. More than just an ideal, the mall informs the show from its inception, featuring a multitude of other brands like a bird's eye view of the arcade – Juicy but also Levi's, Reebok, Eastpak... –, up until its presentation, opening couture week in Paris within Galeries Lafayette, a department store, if a very high-end one.

I wouldn't go so far as to suggest with this that we should try and preserve the American mall, as such an endeavour would be quixotic at best and besides, the reasons for its disgrace are as sensible as the values it promoted were always dubious. But the opportunity to redeem 'dead malls' – the actual terminology for

shopping centres with a high vacancy rate or low consumer traffic – as sites for young people to meet and socialise, still now, or maybe especially now when so few of them are left offline, shouldn't be dismissed. Here in East London, for example, there's the Stratford Centre, well past its prime as a mall, more obviously so since a glossy new alternative, the Westfield shopping centre, has opened nearby. And yet after hours, the dead old mall comes back to life as a committed roller-blading subculture makes good use of its smooth mica-flecked tiles. Reportedly they wear tracksuits, jeans and hoodies, and their wheels are customised out of ice skates. Ewen Spencer took pictures of them for the fourth issue of his *Guapamente* zine, titled *Jam & Cheese*. *"I hear it said that the internet has killed youth culture"* it reads, *"Jam & Cheese shows us that the kids are very much alive, that there is a quiet rebellion going on in unwanted shopping centres [...]. They will take what you no longer want and make it beautiful"*.



Jam & Cheese by Ewen Spencer