
***The New (Public) Space: On Cities, Shopping Centers, Political Demonstrations
and the Future of Public Uses***

Miguel Silva Graça

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**THE NEW (PUBLIC) SPACE:
ON CITIES, SHOPPING CENTERS, POLITICAL DEMONSTRATIONS AND
THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC USES**

*O NOVO ESPAÇO (PÚBLICO):
SOBRE CIDADES, CENTROS COMERCIAIS, MANIFESTAÇÕES POLÍTICAS E O
FUTURO DOS ESPAÇOS PÚBLICOS*

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Abstract

"You will find everything sold together in the same place (...): figs, witnesses to summonses, bunches of grapes, turnips, pears, apples, givers of evidence, roses, medlars, porridge, honeycombs, chick-peas, law suites, allotment machines, irises, lamps, water-clocks, laws, indictments"

Eubulus, IV century Greek poet (Athenaeus,
Deipnosophistai 14.640 b-c)

Between the romanticized version of a Greek Agora and the intense contemporary shopping centers there isn't probably a disparity as considerable as we can imagine, since both can be easily mistaken with the ancient markets and the public squares of today. Before, as now, there is a clear separation between the production of discourse and the experience of the symbolic spaces of the city.

It is a fact that shopping centers are, in general, seen and used by people as effective "public spaces" of the contemporary city.

As evidence of this, is the way we see emerge today phenomena that were hardly visible but in public spaces, such as urban tribes, sport celebrations, political demonstrations and strikes, or even deviant events: suicides committed within their areas. Traces that, taken together, make us consider on the true nature of these heterotopic places.

Therefore, if today the urban daily life of Europe's inhabitants is undoubtedly both linked to the use of public spaces and shopping centers, it's not surprising that political demonstrations are nowadays equally visible in city squares and shopping center plazas, where these are also increasingly common.

For example, in Portugal, we have observed since 2007, a systematic use of shopping centers as an arena of political protests, generally against precarious labor conditions; under this thread, this paper will try precisely to map these and other "public" practices that take place at a wide range of privately owned collective spaces in Europe.

Unquestionably, this "quasi"-public condition of contemporary shopping centers will enhance the doubt on what role these retail typologies may yet take part in the construction of the European city, giving a completely new meaning to the well-known Jordi Borja and Zaida Muxí's assertion that "public space (...) is [the place] where society makes itself visible" (Borja, Muxí; 2003:15). By the fact that if we still don't know what are they turning into; we have, however, a strong suspicion: that, in a near future, these will be more "public" than "shopping" places.

Keywords: Shopping centers; privately owned collective spaces; political demonstrations; Portugal; Europe.

Resumo

"Vereis que tudo é vendido junto no mesmo lugar (...): figos, testemunhas para atender a convocações, cachos de uvas, nabos, peras, maçãs, fornecedores de provas, rosas, nêspersas, sopa, favos de mel, ervilhas, processos legais, máquinas de demarcação, íris, lâmpadas, clepsidras, leis, denúncias".

*Eubulo, poeta grego do século IV
(Athenaeus, Deipnosophistai 14.640 b-c).*

Entre a versão romantizada de uma Ágora grega e os intensos centros comerciais contemporâneos não existe provavelmente uma diferença tão grande como a que podemos supor, pois ambos se confundem com os mercados de então e com as praças públicas de hoje. Antes, tal como agora, existe uma clara distância entre a produção de discurso e a vivência "low cost" dos espaços simbólicos da cidade.

É um facto que os centros comerciais são, em geral, vistos e utilizados pelas pessoas como "espaços públicos" efetivos da cidade contemporânea.

E, prova disso, é a forma como vemos emergir hoje nestes fenómenos que seriam dificilmente visíveis fora de determinados espaços públicos, como tribos urbanas, celebrações desportivas, manifestações políticas e greves, ou mesmo eventos bizarros: como suicídios cometidos dentro dos seus espaços. Traços que, juntos, nos fazem considerar sobre a verdadeira natureza destes lugares heterotópicos.

Assim, se hoje o quotidiano urbano dos habitantes europeus é indiscutivelmente tanto ligado à vivência dos seus espaços públicos como dos seus centros comerciais; não será de estranhar que as contestações políticas de hoje sejam tanto visíveis nas praças da cidade como nas "praças" dos centros comerciais, onde as manifestações começam a ser cada vez mais comuns.

Por exemplo, em Portugal, observamos desde 2007, a uma utilização sistemática dos centros comerciais como uma arena de protestos políticos, geralmente contra condições de trabalho precárias; sendo que relativamente a este tópico, este ensaio tentará precisamente mapear estas e outras práticas "públicas" que ocorrem numa ampla gama de espaços privados de uso colectivos na Europa.

Inquestionavelmente, esta "quase" condição pública dos centros comerciais contemporâneos aumentará a dúvida sobre o papel que estas tipologias comerciais poderão ainda vir tomar na construção da cidade europeia, dando um significado completamente novo à afirmação bem conhecida de Jordi Borja e Zaida Muxí. de que "o espaço público (...) é [o

lugar] onde a sociedade se torna visível" (Borja, Muxi; 2003: 15). Assim, e apesar de ainda não sabermos nos que estes se estão a transformar; temos, no entanto, uma forte suspeita: que, num futuro próximo, estes serão lugares mais "públicos" do que "comerciais".

Palavras-chave: Centros comerciais; espaços privados de uso colectivo; manifestações políticas; Portugal; Europa.

I. Introduction: beliefs and misconceptions

The European city has, in the last decades, suffered a significant physical expansion that extended it beyond its own limits; becoming an entity whose scale and complexity makes it difficult to understand its true role and features.

If we find today the term "crisis" linked to its recent evolution, the truth is that the history of the European city, as a whole, is itself a process of dramatic changes that shook its own foundations. Events like the destruction of stonewalls on medieval cities, the introduction of the first hygienist and orthogonal urban plans or even the expansion of automobile were equally critical moments in its history.

Jürgen Habermas pointed out — in his seminal book *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962) — that the concept of "crisis" was appropriated from the lexicon of Medicine; referring to the stage of a disease process, in which the body has no strength to recover its normal state or health.

By analogy, the term is used in urbanism to describe a state of degradation of the identity, structure and physical form of a city. However wrongly, because the idea of an urban crisis is, by definition, a misconception due to the fact that the city is an ever changing entity that will never return to a previous or ideal form. Even if the notion of "city" is commonly associated with a certain sense of "nostalgia", linked to circumstances previously lived or attributes that have already been lost; the truth is that the city will never be as it was once before.

Nowadays, notions such [as] "center" and "periphery", "public" and "private" or even "place" (Norberg-Schulz: 1976) and "non-place" (Augé: 1992) are challenged by the hybrid nature of a new urban condition, where renewed outstanding elements appear as meaningful places of the urban landscape, in addition to the traditional network of public spaces.

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This phenomenon, common to most European urban areas, is today materialized as an hypertext of recreational and commercial facilities — such as shopping centers, stadiums, thematic parks, industrial showrooms, nightclubs or multi-purpose indoor arenas —which structure a network of uses of a post-urban culture, condensed in time and scattered in space.

The contemporary city is therefore structured by a system of heterotopic privately owned collective spaces, that acquires gradually more and more representativeness to city users, as they go "beyond" their mere condition of nodes of intersection of fluxes, representing, instead, an actual possibility of densification of centrality in urban landscape. And that's why, due to this particular condition, we chose to call these privately owned collective spaces as the “new (public) space” of the contemporary city.



Image 1: “The metropolitan street”, Álvaro Domingues (2011)

II. SHOPPING (&) PUBLIC SPACES

Amongst this network of privately owned collective spaces, shopping centers are not only indispensable places of consumption itself, but also "quasi"-urban components that represent increasingly one of the key places of daily life.

However, if going to the "shopping" is a common and universal experience; the actual role of the shopping center is indeed a controversial topic. For some, these typologies have altered the notion of contemporary urban space, reducing public use to collective practices that they consider "undemocratic" (Sorkin, 1992:xi-xv), "militarized" (Davis, 1992:154-180), "artificial" (Jackson, 1985:260), "panoptic" (Elin, 1997:73) and that "reject the activities of a true center" (Whyte, 1988:208), that circumscribe as well the notion of civic space to a set of "consumption oriented activities" (Ghirardo, 1996:66). Others, point out the inevitability of its hegemony in a "generic city" (Koolhaas, 1997:3-12), arguing that consumption is, in fact, "one of the last remaining forms of public life" (Leong, 2001:128-155), at the same time as well that this retail spaces facilitate new "social and coexistence synergies" (Amendola, 1997: 259), provide a "safe urbanity" (Rybczynski, 1995: 210) and are, certainly, one of the most important architectural paradigms of the twenty-first century, in a "world that, itself, has already turned into a shopping mall" (Crawford, 1992: 3-30).

But, most of all, it is difficult to remain indifferent to this ambiguous and complex object, simultaneously "paradise" and "hell" of the contemporary city (Cautela & Ostidich, 2009).

Also, if the shopping center is, by definition, a group of retail commercial establishments that is planned, developed, owned and managed as a single property with the aim of maximizing profit; on the other side, today, shopping centers are more than just mere sites of consumerism. In the scenic environments of its "streets" and "plazas" – like in the historic, dense and compact city – we wander, eat, drink, rest and consume symbols and merchandises. So visiting them nowadays is not so different from going to the "center".

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Image 2: "Centro Colombo (Lisbon)" and "Via Catarina (Oporto)"
[Images courtesy of Sonae Sierra©]

Due to its particular qualities, the shopping center is — in its essence — an unorthodox and even contradictory object. Simultaneously, a place of business and leisure; open to all, but closed on itself; public in its use, but private in terms of real estate property; with a wide geographical influence, but detailed in its scale; general in its themes, but representative to each individual user.

Along with a broad offer of products and services, we will also find in today's shopping centers, increasingly, a new set of recreational and cultural facilities with a clear goal: to create friendly spaces that invite to stay and consume. Thus, besides being an expression of the actual retail industry — where products are shown, tested and sold — shopping centers are also progressively places where uses, functions and activities — previously reserved to the realm of urban public spaces — are also supported, transforming themselves in highlighted icons of the contemporary European scene, where these commercial structures represent nowadays also nodes of the metropolitan landscape in which they operate.

III. THE EUROPEAN AND PORTUGUESE CONTEXTS

Particularly, in Portugal there were, in the early 2000s, a total of 61 shopping centers with over 5,000 square meters — adding up about 1.4 million square meters of gross leasable area (C&W/H&B, 2002) — this would be a number that would register a continuing increase over this decade, and it would reach in 2009, more than 160 shopping centers with over 5,000 square meters, putting together more than 3.3 million square meters gross leasable area (Aguirre Newman, 2009). Demonstrating that, in Portugal — despite an unfavorable economic scenario — it would prevail, in the late 2000s, a growing trend in the number of openings of average and large sized shopping centers. However, during the following years, from 2010 till today, Portugal would follow a stabilization trend common to most European countries regarding the phenomenon of shopping center's development.

Yet, Portugal — by its nature — consists on a quite unique scenario at a European level. Here, it would be found, in the early 2000s, the highest proportion of European users within the range of 15 to 34 years of age, and the highest percentage of gross leasable area (GLA) per inhabitant of southern Europe (C&W/H&B, 2004). This phenomenon is, moreover, a striking reality in the Portuguese context, as evidenced by the nearly 26 million and 21 million visitors per year (equivalent to approximately 2 million users per month), that

already visited, in the late 2000s, Centro Colombo and NorteShopping; by far the most significant examples of the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto, since this period (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2008).

In general, development trends would present themselves as quite similar across the European context. From the 1970s to the 2000s the general tendency was of continuous growth, with particular strength in the past decades; notably between 1990 and 2004, when the growth rate was 2.5 times higher than that evidenced in the 30 years before (C&W/H&B, 2004b). And if we restrict the scope of analysis to the last 5 years of this last period, this growth was even more pronounced in Eastern Europe countries — like Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia — as well as in Greece, which suffered an increase of GLA of over 75% (C&W/H&B, 2005).

But, from 2009 onwards, we would feel a slowdown in this growth rate, although it would reach, at the end of the decade, an overall sum of more than 128 million square meters of GLA in Europe (C&W, 2011). Also, from 2010 till today, the growth rate continued to decrease, existing in 2017 a total shopping center floor space in Europe of 159.4 million square meters of GLA (C&W, 2017).

Therefore — from 2010 till today — it would be witnessed, throughout Europe, to a clear decrease in the rate of openings; although it would also be observed a slight increase of global GLA, consequence not of new investments in this retail sector, but of an opening of projects in pipeline, started before the beginning of the decade and inaugurated in the last years.

Specifically, in Portugal, since 2012, it wouldn't open any large commercial structure — with the exception of Alegro Setúbal, in 2014, with 27.000 sqm GLA, or Nova Arcada, in 2016, with 68.500 sqm GLA, that resulted from the reconversion of Dolce Vita Braga, that had its opening date postponed three times — as it was also canceled or suspended the opening of several shopping centers across the country, as Vivaci Beja or Fórum Setúbal. However, in 2017, some projects, that were in pipeline for several years, like Évora Shopping that was suspended for more than 5 years, or new developments, like Mar Shopping Algarve, are expected to open till the end of the year, probably inaugurating a new phase of expansion of this sector, after a long period of economic and financial crisis in Europe, and particularly in Portugal.

The decrease of openings, however, will not be a phenomenon that will empty the "squares" of the existing shopping centers. Even being a scenario that affects the entire economic sector — from real estate enterprises to tenants — as well as the purchasing power

of the consumers themselves, it will not imply — as it is quite visible at the high levels of intensity of use that these spaces continue to hold today — that shopping spaces are no longer one of the favorite places of city users.

However, the actual scenario of economic crisis will reflect itself in a clear shift in the way people relate to shopping centers. Not only at inducing changes in consumer habits with less purchasing power, which will become more sensitive to use than consumption, as well at the level of the urban image and representativeness of shopping centers, visibly affected by a diminishing rate of apertures and even the closure of several units. Demonstrating that these are not permanent and immutable formulas, but rather consist of flexible and limited duration elements that, as the industrial facilities of other times, might be the future "brownfields" — of forthcoming urban regeneration plans — of a city yet to come.

However, despite the actual international crisis scenario, something remained unchanged: the significant role that shopping centers still have in the urban daily life of contemporary European city. From Lisbon to Istanbul, from Naples to Rotterdam, or from Lille to Berlin, we still find today in Europe a close relationship between city users and its retail spaces.

IV. PUBLIC?

This essay tried to address the actual role of privately owned collective spaces, trying to re-center the view on the way people appropriate the places of contemporary city, putting side-by-side public uses and shopping practices.

However, between the romanticized version of a Greek Agora and the intense contemporary shopping centers there isn't probably a disparity as considerable as we can imagine, since both can be easily mistaken with the ancient markets and the public squares of today.

It is a fact that shopping centers are, in general, seen and used as effective "public spaces" of the contemporary city. Not only the consumption practices, carried out on them, are effective builders of identity, collective memory and new daily life habits; but they are also places that we actually recognize as receptacles of lifestyles and gradually complex socialization processes.

Consequently, the condition of place of centrality that the shopping center progressively gains, mainly in the "non-historic" city, will definitely put into discussion the actual role of the public space itself. And, even though, the distinction between the public and private realm are one of the more striking civilizational cleavages of all times and, both of them, are pillars of the western urban planning; its Hellenistic-well-delimited-and-studied archetypal formulas are also disputable.

If we find, clearly, the roots of this dichotomy — like, Hannah Arendt clarified in *The Human Condition* (1958) — in the ancient Greek opposition between *polis* — as the self-governed, autonomic and independent community of citizens that share a common ground — and *oikos* — as the familiar basic unit that share a common house —; the effective materialization of the public and private space were quite different from the idyllic philosophical definition of these terms.

Much different from Aristotle's and Plato's descriptions, that immortalized the Agora as a participative democratic space; Eubulus, a Greek poet from the IV century described this founding archetype of "public space" in western civilization, basically, as the place where "you will find everything sold together in the same place (...): figs, witnesses to summonses, bunches of grapes, turnips, pears, apples, givers of evidence, roses, medlars, porridge, honeycombs, chick-peas, law suites, allotment machines, irises, lamps, water-clocks, laws, indictments" (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 14.640 b-c).

Before, as now, there is a clear separation between the production of discourse and the experience of the symbolic spaces of the city. ^[1] Just a few blocks away from where the Athenian Agora was, and still is, located we will find the Syntagma Square. Here, during the more difficult years of the Greek economic crisis, organized protesters and non-protesters gathered around the plaza, making assemblies and taking decisions by raising their hand in the air, like it was more than 2,500 years ago. With one difference, today there's no restriction neither on the speech nor to the voting on women, youngsters, "foreigners" or "slaves".

From "slow protests" — like the one in Tahrir Square, whose occupation in 2011 developed progressively during more than one month — to "fast protests" — like the ones that happened recursively, during the Spanish economic crisis, in Puerta del Sol, that in an afternoon change the configuration of the plaza —; it is witnessed, around the world, to the settling of public space occupation on the political agenda, integrating the participative democratic praxis — i.e. the debate and co-decision and self-organization practices — with the temporary occupation of public space.

Conforming to what Pedro Bandeira would call the ultimate form of "kamp+ism"; that is to say, a protesting form that combine transitory settling ("kamp") and political rhetoric ("ism").

However if today, undoubtedly, the urban daily life of city dwellers is both linked to the use of public spaces and shopping centers; it's not surprising that political demonstrations are today both visible in the "occupied" city squares and the shopping center plazas where demonstrations are also more and more common.

Probably, the first worldwide known example of an occupation of a shopping center has happened in Thailand, in 2010, during the protests organized by the National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (known as "Red-Shirts") in which they occupied the Rachaprasong shopping district, and particularly CentralWorld Shopping that was inclusively set on fire when the Red Shirts anti-government protesters were compulsorily removed from it, after months of demonstrations and the complete blockage of this retail facility.

Another well-known event was "Rolezinhos" in Brazil, a kind of flash mob or gathering of teenagers from the poor suburbs in shopping malls usually just visited by the rich. The first one happened in 2013 when about 6,000 young people turned out at the Itaquera Shopping, in São Paulo. After this one, several other "rolezinhos" took place in São Paulo and also all around Brazil.

However, as it may seem at a first glance, this is not an abnormal phenomenon, but it's instead a global trend. Since the beginning of the past decade, there were numerous political demonstrations in shopping centers all around the world; all continents included, as there are, in all of them, shopping centers and people using them as public spaces.

In Europe, particularly, the demonstrations approach several themes, being most of them related to employment issues (like precarious work conditions or cuts in wages and pensions), but also urban planning and environmental issues or even civil rights, like the ones organized in Spain, in 2013, by breastfeeding mothers (self-proclaimed "lactivists", or lactation activist) in protest for not letting them breastfeed their babies in shopping center retail areas.

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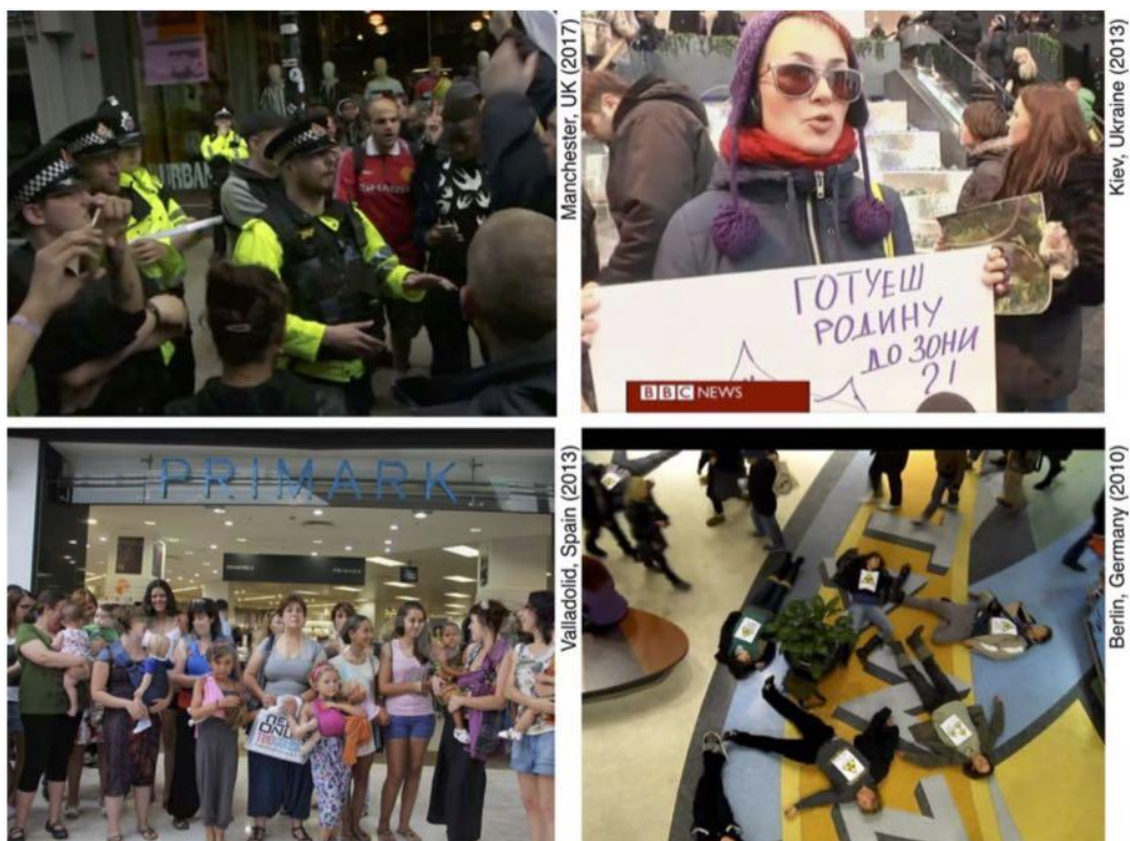


Image 3: Examples of political demonstrations in European shopping centers (2010-2017)

Particularly, in Portugal, we have observed since 2007 a systematic use of shopping centers as an arena of political protests, generally against precarious labor conditions and mainly in the shopping centers of its two main metropolitan areas: Lisbon and Oporto.

The formats used are extremely variable. From flash mobs to scheduled strikes, from sit-in's to die-in's, from silent to megaphone-driven demonstrations, from leaflets to balloons and t-shirt's with messages, from holding signs to playing music, everything is possible when the intention is to protest for a cause.

Another format that also emerged in Portugal is the organizations of “meets”. It's summoned like a flash mob, via Facebook or Twitter, and the goal is youngsters to “meet” in person other youngsters that they only know virtually and follow on the social networks. Similar to Brazilian “Rolezinhos”, the participants come mainly from the suburbs and gather together in the places that they see and reclaim as “public space” to themselves: shopping centers, of course.

In Portugal, in 2014, one of the “meets” — that happened in Vasco da Gama Shopping Center in Lisbon — didn't go well. Youngsters were expelled of the shopping center by the police, some were arrested, both sides were injured, racist accusations rapidly arise. Youngsters reclaimed the right to “meet”, to socialize, and to hang around in shopping

centers. And therefore putting in discussion the right to protest or simply to freely use these “quasi”-public spaces.

Evidence of its new role is the way how we see emerge in them today phenomena that were hardly visible but in public spaces, like political demonstrations, but also like sport celebrations, commemorations, religious events, festivals, fireworks shows, political campaigns, rallies or strikes.

However, and despite the kaleidoscopic possibilities that can be held in these retail typologies, the figure of political demonstration in shopping centers is probably the most striking example of this miscegenation between the public and the private realm of the contemporary city, giving therefore a completely new meaning to the well-known Jordi Borja assertion that “public space (...) is [the place] where society makes itself visible” (2003:15).

Even, if we do not know what role this hybrid typology may yet take part in the contemporary city, these are nowadays formulas that have changed the way we see and use public and private space. But, most of all, shopping centers are today urban elements — accumulating the condition of being both places of consumerism and centrality in contemporary metropolitan regions — that we cannot continue to ignore in the theorization of the present and future of urban public space.

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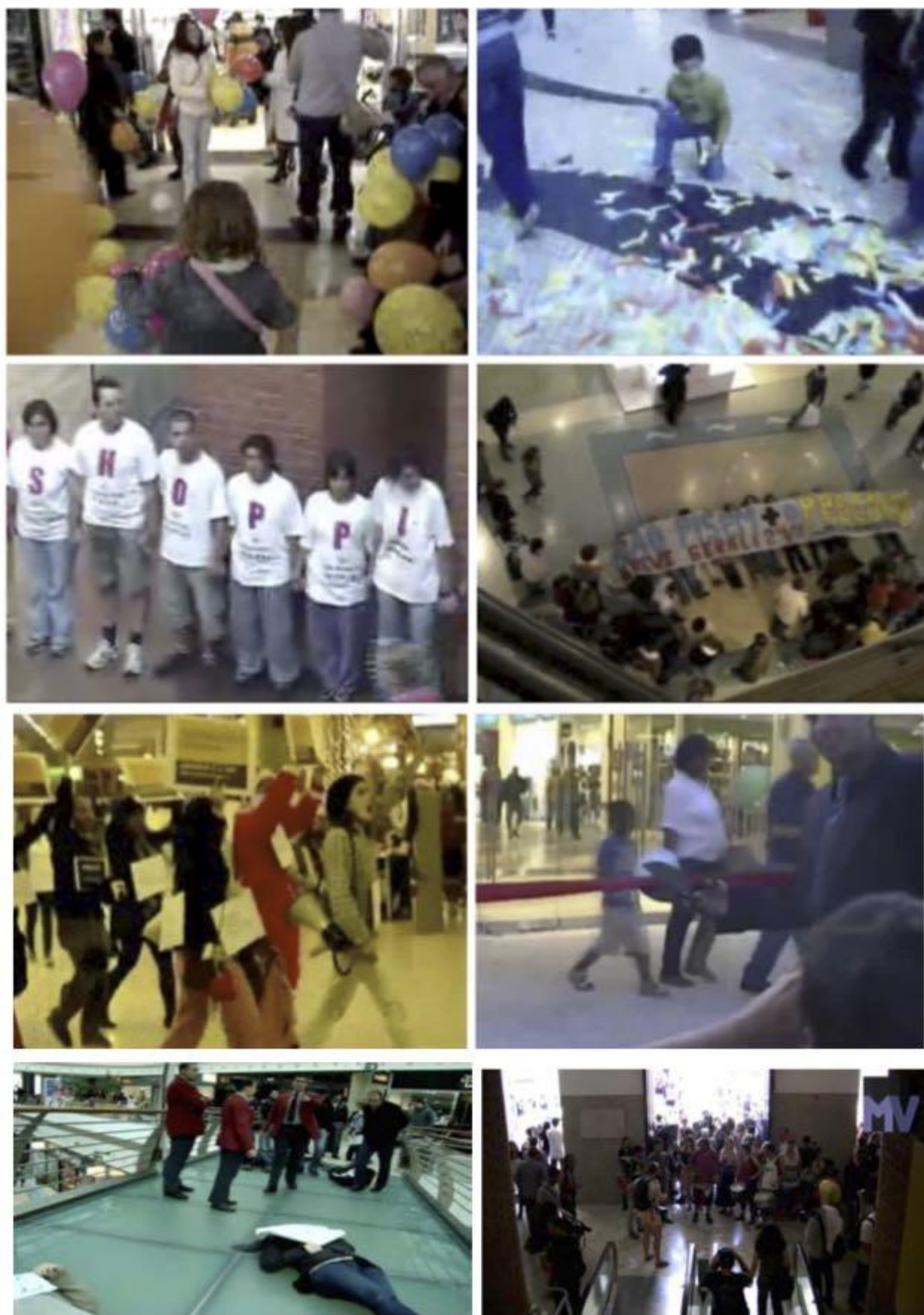


Image 4: Examples of political demonstrations in Portuguese shopping centers
[Via Catarina, Porto (2007); Centro Colombo, Lisboa (2008);
NorteShopping, Matosinhos (2007); C.C. Vasco da Gama, Lisboa (2010);
Fórum Almada, Almada (2011); Dolce Vita Tejo, Amadora (2012);
C.C. Vasco da Gama, Lisboa (2012); Armazéns do Chiado, Lisboa (2013)]

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